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PIONEER ICELANDIC PASTOR

The Life of the Reverend Paul Thorlaksson

by George J. Houser PhD

Edited by Paul A. Sigurdson

PIONEER ICELANDIC PASTOR

The Reverend Paul Thorlaksson was one of the best known and most controversial figures among the early Icelandic pioneers in North America. He was a man of resolute spiritual conviction and extraordinary compassion, and he worked tirelessly for the well-being of Icelanders who migrated to the United States and Canada during the late 1800s. He founded the Icelandic settlement at Mountain, North Dakota, where a monument has been erected in tribute to his religious and community leadership.

He is also remembered as being at the centre of the "religious controversy" in New Iceland (Gimli, Manitoba), where he ministered to many of the settlers and travelled long miles on foot to conduct services and provide solace. While his motives were sometimes misunderstood or willfully misrepresented during a determined campaign to discredit him, his determination and steadfast faith were a source of strength to people suffering from the harsh climate, disease and poverty.

Dr. George J. Houser's biography of the Reverend Paul Thorlaksson is a rich and well-researched story of a remarkable man. It is also a rare and often poignant picture of the hardships endured by immigrants in a new land.

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Pioneer Icelandic Pastor

The Reverend Paul Thorlaksson

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The Life of the Reverend Paul Thorlaksson

George J. Houser, PhD

Edited by Paul A. Sigurdson

MANITOBA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Greater love hath no man than this, that a man
lay down his life for his friends.

John 15: 13

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FOREWORD

About ten years ago Dr. Paul H.T. Thorlakson asked Dr. George Houser to write a biography of Dr. Thorlakson's late uncle, a well-known Icelandic minister, the Reverend Paul Thorlaksson. Dr. Houser agreed to the proposal and began the work. He was an ideal man to do the biography, not only because he was a brilliant researcher, but also because he had, through study in Reykjavík, mastered the Icelandic language. Most of the significant source material was naturally in Icelandic.

From the beginning the intention was to finish the biography for the centenary of Rev. Thorlaksson's death in 1982. However, this became impossible due to the serious health problems Dr. Houser encountered which, coupled with failing eyesight, brought his work to a virtual standstill. In the fall of 1988 Dr. Houser passed away and the manuscript, although almost complete, was still in a rough state.

At this point Dr. Thorlakson turned over the task of completing the manuscript to me, with the understanding that I would polish it sufficiently so it could eventually be presented to the printer. I have not altered Dr. Houser's system of bibliographic notation, and I can take little credit for the mountainous research that went into the writing of this book. Dr. Houser deserves all the credit; and the descendants of Thorlákur Jónsson, Rev. Paul's father, owe him deep gratitude for his thorough research. I should add, however, that the material in Chapter XII was largely researched by me to present a more complete picture of the serious religious and political conflict which Dr. Houser had not fully explained. Also, because I am a member of the Thorlakson family I grew up with stories and anecdotes about Rev. Paul, my great-uncle, and the Icelandic settlers in general, and I have added several of these.

This good biography of Rev. Paul Thorlaksson is long overdue. Through the years he has been misunderstood and often criticized. Dr. Houser's thorough research will now allow us to re-evaluate this brilliant, compassionate leader and to understand why he was so strongly opposed by a few, and yet loved by so many. It should be inspiring to contemplate his absolute faith in God, and his earnest, and indeed noble, efforts to walk in the steps of Christ.

June 17th, 1989 PAUL A. SIGURDSON
Morden, Manitoba

Note: The full name of the main person in this book is Páll Þorláksson as spelled in Icelandic. The Páll is pronounced roughly POW-DL, the first part "Pa" rhyming with the English "now" and the last part "ll" having a unique clicking "dl" sound completely foreign to English. This sound is something like a click of the tongue. However, the normal clicking we make in English is produced by an *implosion;* this click is produced by an *explosion* of the breath and it comes out of one side of the mouth, bouncing lightly off the inside of that cheek.

In English the Icelandic name Páll is Paul, and we have used this spelling throughout for Paul Thorlaksson, and have deleted the accent from his family name. Several other Pálls appear in the book and they all retain the Icelandic spelling. (P.A.S.)

PREFACE

AMONG THE NAMES of Icelandic pioneers in North America, one of the most familiar is that of the Reverend Paul Thorlaksson, who died at Mountain, North Dakota on March 12, 1882 in his thirty-third year. Born in Iceland in 1849, Paul Thorlaksson emigrated to America in 1872 at the age of twenty-two. In the ten years before his untimely death from pulmonary tuberculosis, he became one of the most widely discussed and controversial figures among the Icelandic settlers in the United States and Canada. This reputation is all the more unusual in view of the fact that for the first three years in America he was still a theological student, while during the final year of his life he was bedfast most of the time.

Paul had the clarity of vision to recognize that the preservation of the finest elements of Icelandic culture would be enhanced rather than diminished through contact with people from other countries who could teach the Icelanders the skills and techniques they had to acquire before they could prosper here. He envisioned more clearly than anyone else the legacy of Icelandic prosperity in America, and the potential prosperity for all Icelanders on this continent.

Ironically, however, there was a persistent tendency to associate Paul's name primarily with the so-called "religious controversy" at New Iceland rather than with the qualities of leadership he displayed and his outstanding accomplishments.

Harshly criticized in print by some of his contemporaries, by others Paul was gratefully remembered as the compassionate and indomitable "Father of the Icelandic Settlement in North Dakota."

Most of the primary source material about the early Icelandic experience in North America consists of official documents, records and annals. The raw material of biography after the passage of 100 years is, however, more elusive and considerably less objective. It consists largely of letters, diaries, reminiscences and contemporary newspaper clippings, most of which were based on personal reactions rather than objective reporting. In the case of Paul Thorlaksson, who from 1875 until 1882 was an ordained Lutheran minister, his own pastoral records also constitute an essential source. A school copybook with some of these records came to light only recently in a trunk in the attic of a house in North Dakota. The remainder of the material has been gathered from the Public Archives of Canada, Special Collections of the Elizabeth Dafoe Library of the University of Manitoba, private collections in Canada, the United States and Iceland, the National Archives of Iceland and the manuscript collection of the National Library in Reykjavík.

Because most of this material was written in the Icelandic language, direct translation by the writer accounts for a large part of this work.

The wide dispersion of the primary source material, as well as its inaccessibility to researchers with no knowledge of Icelandic, has been largely responsible for the misunderstanding of Paul and his motives. The final, authoritative word on most subjects has yet to be written, and such is no doubt the case with the life and career of Paul Thorlaksson. Should some future historian or biographer uncover additional information, the writer would be only too pleased.

It is to be hoped, however, that the present work will cast light on aspects of Paul Thorlaksson's career that up to now have not been accorded the attention they merit. In this way, perhaps, one can best honour the memory of a remarkable man on the centenary of his death.

March, 1982
Winnipeg, Manitoba

GEORGE J. HOUSER, PhD

INTRODUCTION

THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC conditions of mid-nineteenth–century Iceland into which Paul Thorlaksson was born were far more closely allied to those of the Middle Ages than to the circumstances prevailing today. However, this cannot be said of the political situation. Iceland was under Danish control and its people, although poor, were to a large measure free and enlightened.

The population of about 57,000 was predominantly rural. The only town of any size was Reykjavík, with about 900 inhabitants. There were no roads and few bridges, no harbour worthy of the name and no lighthouses. Few of the fishing boats boasted decks, and even fewer were owned by the Icelanders themselves. Housing was primitive and unsanitary, damp and poorly ventilated. There was no regular coastal service to supply localities which for months each year were inaccessible by land. Every winter foreign postal service via Denmark was suspended. There was no system of public education. Iceland had only one grammar school and a theological seminary, but by mid-century there still was not a single hospital. The country had no more than two physicians and perhaps four or five midwives who had received professional training in Denmark. In 1848 the disproportionate rate of infant mortality in the Westman Islands, off the southern coast of Iceland, due to lockjaw (tetanus), spurred the Danish authorities to appoint Dr. P.A. Schleisner to make an official investigation.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century the Icelandic economy was assailed by one natural catastrophe after another. In 1855 a virulent epidemic of sheep mange (scabies) broke out in Mosfellssveit in southwestern Iceland. As measures to bring it under control were neither adequate nor timely, it swiftly spread to the west and north. In the most severely smitten districts entire flocks were afflicted and destroyed. About the same time an epidemic of rabies broke out among sheep dogs, wiping out all the dogs in some districts. The winter of 1858-1859 was one of the most severe in decades and initiated a period of climatic deterioration which lasted until about 1890. Unusually cold winters with thick pack-ice off the northern coast were followed by late springs with insufficient rainfall. Sometimes the pack-ice completely blocked off the long, northern fjords. There were frequent frosts in summer and then wet weather which prevented the hay from drying. Many farmers were forced into debt to purchase hay from other districts or constrained to slaughter some of their breeding stock to prevent their death from starvation.

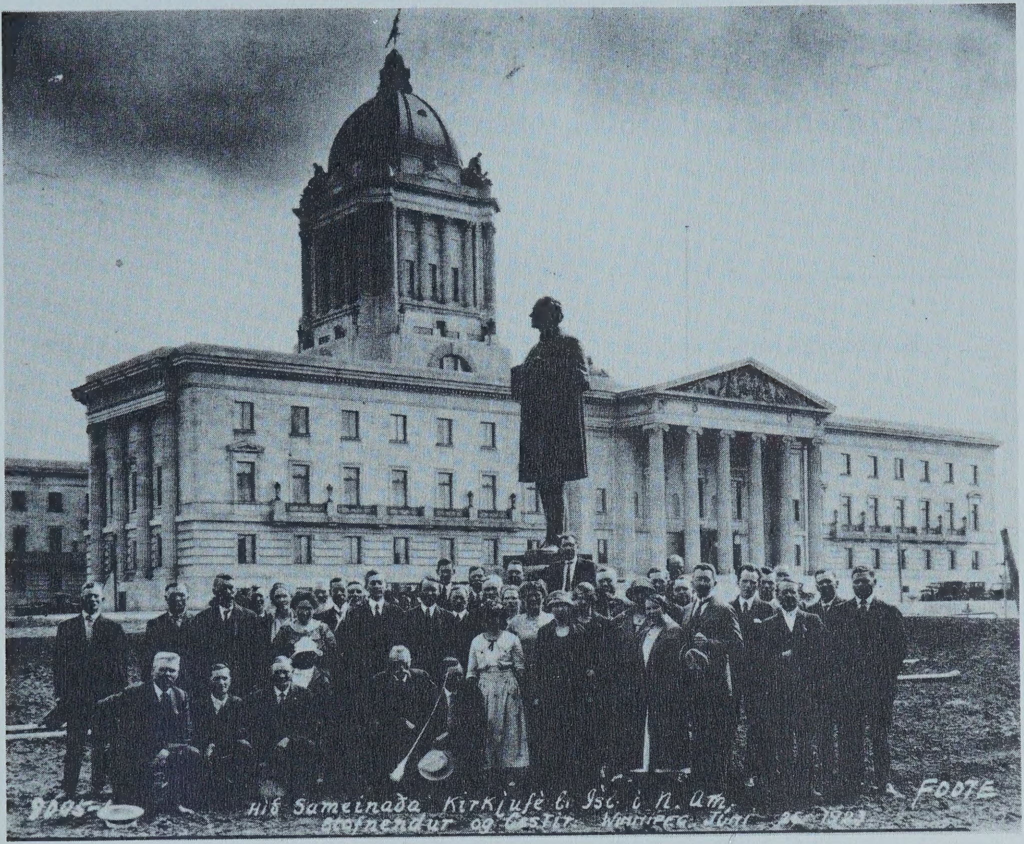
Until 1854 all commerce was in the hands of Danish companies or individual Danish merchants. Although free trade was introduced that year, there were no industries and, apart from the knitting of woollen goods for home use, no handicraft trades. Other than root vegetables and cabbage, grown here and there on a modest scale, the only agricultural crop was hay.

The July Revolution of 1830 in France had repercussions in Iceland as well as in Denmark and other continental countries. Icelandic reaction took the form of a struggle for restoration of the National Assembly, the Althing. The earliest leaders of this movement were Baldvin Einarsson, Bjarni Thorarensen, Tómas Saemundsson and one of Iceland's greatest poets, Jónas Hallgrímsson. About 1840 a new figure appeared on the scene, Jón Sigurdsson (1811-1879), who led the struggle for the next forty years.

Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, however, the political outlook for Iceland remained bleak. In 1848 the king renounced absolutism in Denmark, but the Danish government continued its refusal to recognize the justice of Iceland's claim for self-government while united with Denmark under the king, a claim based on ancient rights dating back to the year 1262.

In 1843-1845 the Icelandic National Assembly (Althing) was reinstated, but only as a consultative body with no legislative powers or control over finances.[1]

For administrative purposes, Iceland was and still is divided into counties *(sýslur*, sing. *sýsla*), and each county is made up of a number of rural municipalities *(hreppar,* sing. *hreppur).* The reeve of a rural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Hið Sameinaða Kirkjufél. Ísl. í N. Am.
Stofnendur og Gestir Winnipeg Júní 24 1923
FOOTE

Statue of Jón Sigurdsson (1811-1879), Icelandic patriot, scholar and statesman who led the fight with Denmark for self-government, which culminated with the granting of a constitution in 1874. His statue was placed on the grounds of the Manitoba Legislative Building in Winnipeg in 1921. Gathering of founders and guests of the United Church Society of Icelandic Lutherans in North America, 1923. Photograph: Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Sigurdson 2.

municipality is called *hreppstjori;* one of his responsibilities is the administration of relief to the poor. The highest administrative officer of a county is the *sýslumadur,* who is also the county judge.

Depicted with broad strokes, this is the setting in which our account begins to unfold.

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1. Bergsteinn Jónsson, et al., "An Outline History," *Iceland 1966,* pp. 30-55.

I

THE EARLY YEARS

ONE OF THE MOST TELLING influences on Paul Thorlaksson's character was the religious example set by his father, Thorlákur Gunnar Jónsson. Thorlákur's father, Jón Ívarsson, owned his own farm in northern Iceland; his mother, Rannveig Magnúsdóttir, was the daughter of the Reverend Magnús Erlendsson, rural dean *(prófastur)* at Hrafnagil in Eyjafjardarsýsla. Thorlákur's parents were living in eastern Iceland when he was born on August 16, 1824, but eight years later they returned to their farm Naust, not far from the northern Iceland town of Akureyri. In 1835, when Thorlákur was eleven years old, he was sent to the parsonage at Háls in Fnjóskadal to be educated by the pastor there, the Reverend Sigurdur Árnason, who was married to Valgerdur, the sister of Thorlákur's mother.

Even in the absence of public schools, illiteracy was rare in nineteenth-century Iceland. Children received their first lessons at home from an older member of the household or, in some instances, from itinerant teachers, engaged for a few weeks at a time. Families with the means arranged for their sons to continue their education under the guidance of a clergyman, some of whom boarded several boys at their homes over the winter. Hence Thorlákur received a somewhat better than average education for an Icelandic boy of his day. During the nine years Thorlákur remained at his uncle's parsonage he also learned a good deal about sheep-breeding and the management of an Icelandic farm, for like virtually all the Icelandic pastors at that time, Rev. Sigurdur Árnason also administered a sizeable farm.

Thorlákur left his aunt and uncle in 1844 at the age of twenty to become secretary to Sigfús Schulesen, the judge *(sýslumadur)* at

Húsavík, a fishing port and market town as well as the administrative centre of Sudur-Thingeyjarsýsla, a county to the east of Eyjafjörd in northern Iceland. It was probably there that he developed the beautiful hand which he retained into his old age.

After a year in Schulesen's employ, Thorlákur spent two years working for the Reverend Thorsteinn Pálsson, an eminent cleric who strongly supported the movement among Icelanders to rid themselves of the restrictions imposed by the Danish government. Although the nature of his duties there is not reported, it seems likely Thorlákur was employed in an administrative capacity.

It was probably during this period that Thorlákur became engaged to his future wife but, again, details are lacking. Henrietta Lovisa's mother was Icelandic but her father was of Norwegian origin, a merchant at Siglufjörd, a village on the northern coast of Iceland just west of the mouth of Eyjafjörd. Thorlákur and Henrietta were married on October 28, 1847, then went to live in Húsavík, where Thorlákur returned to his former position with Schulesen. Two children were born to them there, Haraldur on January 20, 1848 and Paul on November 13, 1849.

A few months after Paul's birth Thorlákur left Schulesen's employ again and worked for about a year as a seaman, probably on a fishing boat out of Húsavík. Then in 1851 he and Henrietta moved with their two small sons to the farmstead, named Stóru-Tjarnir ("Big Ponds") in Ljósavatnshrepp, Sudur-Thingeyjarsýsla, where they lived for the next fourteen years. In 1865 they moved to Kross, another farm in the district, but after four years they returned to Stóru-Tjarnir, where they resided until their departure from Iceland in 1873. By that time there were nine children, six boys and three girls, all of whom survived to maturity, a rare occurrence indeed in nineteenth-century Iceland.

Their children were:

Haraldur (1848-1914)
Páll (Paul) (1849-1882)
Gudrún Jakóbína (1853-1923)
(married T. Isakson)
Jón Valdimar (1854-1924)
Rannveig (1855-1931)
(married T. Miller)
Niels Steingrímur (1857-1943)
Thorstein (1858-1932)
Björn (1860-1898)
Sólveig Valgerdur (1862-1909)
(married T. Sveinsson)

Thorlákur's position with Schulesen gave him a good insight into political and administrative procedures, and in this respect many of his

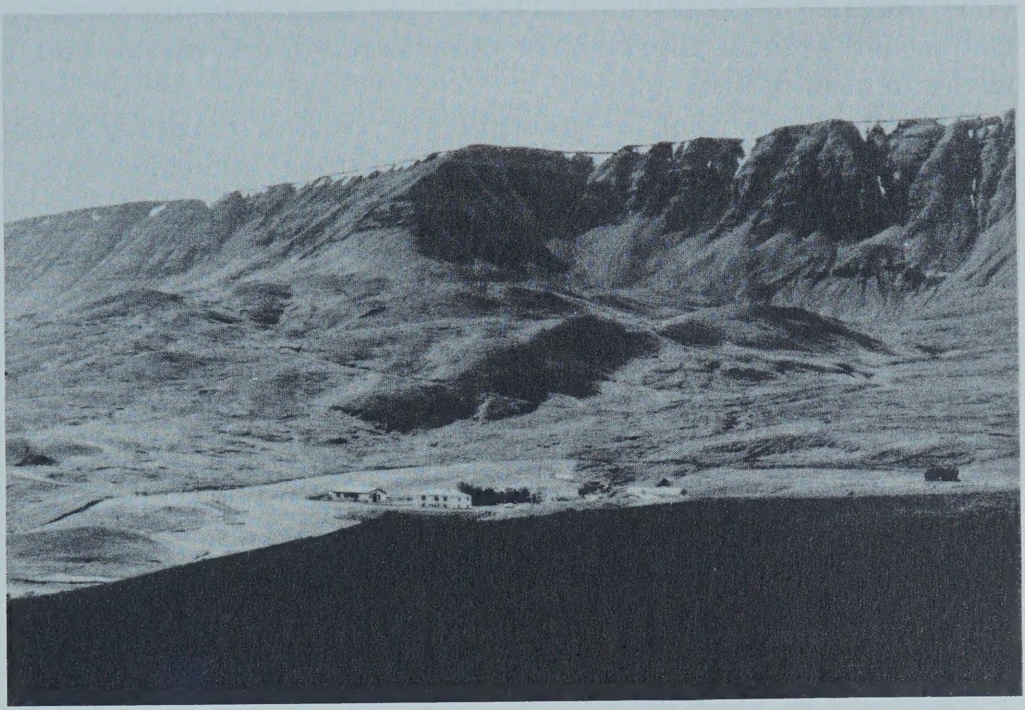
Reverend Paul Thorlaksson's parents, Thorlákur Jónsson and Henrietta Lovisa, who is in festive Icelandic dress.

neighbours looked to him for guidance. For eight years he served as reeve of the rural municipality Ljósavatnshrepp, in which Stóru-Tjarnir was located, and for an even longer period was active in local politics and the movement for increased Icelandic autonomy. In 1853, when the newly elected representative from Sudur-Thingeyjarsýsla to the National Assembly, the Reverend Jón Kristjansson from Yztafell, rode to Reykjavík he carried with him six petitions regarding local matters. One of them, a request for more democratic procedures in local government, bore 157 signatures, second of which was that of Thorlákur Gunnar Jónsson.[1]

Toward the end of the 1860s, Thorlákur landed in the bad graces of a high-ranking civil servant of the Danish administration, Petur Havstein, the District Governor *(Amtmadur)* who resided at Mödruvellir. Havstein was embroiled in bitter disputes with the shark fishermen of northern Iceland, with several members of the National Assembly and with those men who were promoting the cause of emigration to Brazil. Among his most bitter opponents were some of Thorlákur's best friends. An inordinate amount of ill feeling was engendered. Havstein ordered an official investigation into the affairs of the rural municipality of which Thorlákur was reeve. Thorlákur, however, had nothing to hide and emerged from the investigation unscathed.

The farmstead Stóru-Tjarnir is situated on the southwest shore of an attractive lake, Ljósavatn ("Sparkling Water"). A steep mountain towers over the farmstead and drops away towards the east. In a saddle on the mountain are a lush meadow and a pond teeming with fish where Paul and his brothers must have spent many a happy summer day. In winter there was skating on the lake and, like most Icelandic boys, Paul was thoroughly competent on horseback. No doubt, as soon as he was old enough for the responsibility, he was given a lamb to raise, shear and eventually send to market, as is still customary on many Icelandic farms.

The relationship between Paul and his father could scarcely have been more meaningful or characterized by more affectionate mutual regard. Even while Paul was still a child, his quickness to learn was a source of pride to Thorlákur. As a boy, he displayed a keen interest in everything that concerned his father and must have bombarded him with questions. There can be no doubt that Thorlákur taught Paul



Stóru-Tjarnir ("Big Ponds"), the farmstead in northern Iceland where the Thorlákur Jónsson family lived from 1851-1873, except for four years. Paul was one of nine children. Photograph: Professor Haraldur Bessason, 1986.

everything he knew about animal husbandry, farm economy, administration and politics. Later on, he came to rely implicitly on Paul's advice in most of these matters.

While Paul grew up in an atmosphere of political ferment at Stóru-Tjarnir, his religious background was traditional and conservative. Thorlákur Gunnar Jónsson was a deeply religious man. The letters he wrote, in which he frequently cited cogent passages from the scriptures, demonstrate his profound faith.

Generally, the people of northern Iceland had a greater attachment to the Lutheran State Church than elsewhere in the country. In his doctoral dissertation, Gunnar Karlsson notes, for instance:

> The Reverend Jón Austmann was pastor in Bardardal for 25 years, from 1847 until 1872. After that he held the benefice at Saurbaer in Eyjafjörd for ten years before moving to Stödvarfjörd in the eastern part of the country. From there he wrote to Thorlákur Jónsson in 1886: "With regard to spiritual matters the condition is deplorable. People seldom attend church. Many never receive the sacraments and some have discontinued home devotions. . . . Everything was so different in the north."[2]

The winter of 1862-1863, when Paul was thirteen years old, his father sent him to his old friend Pastor Björn Halldórsson at Laufás for tutoring and catechetical instruction. Thorlákur and Björn had been close friends ever since their boyhood when they were fellow students at the parsonage at Háls. The Reverend Björn Halldórsson was a progressive farmer and livestock-breeder in addition to being an urbane minister and an excellent teacher, endowed with a keen sense of humour.[3]

On Sunday, March 15, 1863 he gave Paul a letter to deliver to his father when he returned home to Stóru-Tjarnir. The tone of the letter ranges from the jocular to the serious, and the subject matter from the responsibilities of a pastor to shark fishing and the home remedies employed to cure a sick cow. His deep affection for the lad is apparent as well. With regard to Paul and the progress he had made, the pastor wrote:

> Your Palli[4] is getting ready to leave tomorrow morning. I am providing him with a horse and shall see that he is accompanied as far as Bödvarsnes. He has done well during his sojourn with us, and to my mind, has the qualities requisite for a teacher, a better than average

> one, moreover, however high a degree of knowledge we "suetlanders" may attain.[5] Yes, I would wish that half our students were no less gifted than Paul and were as good-hearted as I consider him to be. He has grown a little since he came here, not much to be sure, but even that is better than not at all.[6] The guidance I've given him has been less than I might have wished; sometimes I didn't get around to it, sometimes I was pressed for time, sometimes was away from home, and occasionally he was indisposed. But he has profited by the instruction he has had, so I praise both of us at the same time. I could not underestimate myself. I have not examined him in arithmetic; to me nothing is more boring than teaching arithmetic, but I am aware that he has made some progress and will improve with time. . . . If we are still alive next winter and nothing happens to prevent it, I should like to promise him another month to promote his understanding of Danish and ability in Icelandic composition, for to tell the truth, I think he would make considerably more progress after another period of instruction. . . . I tested him along with other children on the first three chapters, and in his case found only that, in my opinion, he reads too fast, as is frequently the case with children who are quick to learn and have good comprehension. Today he reads very expressively, too rapidly, however, and I think one must continue to caution him against that. He can do it; I know that he reads the home devotions expressively and carefully. I shall write no more about him at present, but wish him well and give him my blessing on parting, for I am very fond of him and could only wish that no one had less success siring boys than you have had with Paul.

It may be assumed that Paul Thorlaksson returned to Laufás the following winter, if not the following two winters, for additional instruction preparatory to writing the entrance examinations for the Grammar School in Reykjavík. By 1866 Paul, at the age of seventeen, was ready to pursue an academic career.

Before 1801 Paul could have had the choice of two cathedral schools, the one at Skálholt or the one at Hólar. However, in that year Iceland had become a single diocese and the two schools had been amalgamated at Reykjavík, so Reykjavík became the episcopal centre of the country.

In 1804 operations of the Reykjavík school had been transferred a few miles away to Bessastadir on Alftanes, but in 1846 the school was moved back to Reykjavík again, where it was popularly called both the Grammar School and the Latin School. Some of its alumni went on to the University of Copenhagen, others into administrative positions in Iceland, but most of these young men prepared for careers in the state church at the theological school established in Reykjavík in 1843.

Completion of the Grammar School curriculum normally required six years, but Paul Thorlaksson was so well prepared by Pastor Björn Halldórsson that he was permitted to enter the second year of courses immediately. He entered the school the autumn of 1866 and graduated in the spring of 1871. A transcript of his academic record has not been preserved but contemporary documents suggest the curriculum consisted of the following courses:

Icelandic
Danish
German
Written Latin
Oral Latin
Greek
Religion
World History
Geography
Algebra
Geometry
Physics
Natural History

Paul also studied and became unusually adept in English and French. During his final year at the Grammar School he and his close friend, Gudmundur Jónsson from Mýrarhús on Seltjárnarnes, requested instruction in the elements of Hebrew. School regulations still provided for such instruction if requested, but no one had applied after the school was moved from Bessastadir back to Reykjavík. Gísli Magnússon, one of the faculty, undertook to instruct the two boys in his own home. The instruction was rudimentary indeed, for Gísli had had no contact with the language since his own student days at Bessastadir, many years before. The boys were not officially examined on their knowledge of Hebrew.[7]

Paul had a realistic attitude about his achievements and standing, and, in a letter he wrote to his father from Reykjavík, we get a sense of his modesty: "My standing this winter has never fallen below what it was last summer. For one month I stood highest in my class and could perhaps have maintained that position longer had I really tried, but it is not good to be highest. It is better to be second highest, as I am. Consequently I have the best seat in the class and for the time being would be reluctant to relinquish it."

Graduates of the Reykjavík Grammar School filled most of the administrative positions in the civil service of Iceland. Quite a few of them went on to study for the ministry at the theological seminary established in Reykjavík in 1843. The sons of a few well-to-do families continued their studies at the University of Copenhagen. Paul's intention was to study philology there in anticipation of an academic career in Denmark. This would have been beyond the financial means of his parents, but Dr. Jón Hjaltalín offered to contribute substantially to the expenses of Paul's education. Dr. Hjaltalín was the Chief Medical Officer of Iceland and was married to a cousin of Paul's mother.

In 1866, when Paul Thorlaksson came to the Grammar School, Reykjavík was a town of only some 900 inhabitants. Even in a town of that size, however, it was possible for a boy who had never lived anywhere previously but on a farm to become lonely. Dr. Hjaltalín and his wife, whose home was in Reykjavík, must have extended frequent invitations to Paul, but he no doubt felt more at home with the Gudjonsen family. Peter Gudjonsen, a talented musician and composer remembered today as the father of modern Icelandic choral music, was organist and choir director at the Lutheran Cathedral in Reykjavík. His mother, Gudlaug Magnúsdóttir, and Paul's paternal grandmother, Rannveig, were sisters. Peter Gudjonsen and his wife Sigrid (née Knudsen) raised fifteen children and provided all of them with a fine education. Their oldest daughter Lára Mikaelina, who was about Paul's age, was not only a gifted singer and pianist, but also accomplished on the guitar.

It was no doubt at the home of the animated and artistic Gudjonsen family that Paul first met Jón Bjarnason, who became a close friend and eventually one of Paul's strongest rivals. Jón was the son of a clergyman in eastern Iceland, and had graduated from the Grammar School a few months before Paul matriculated there. Now he was studying theology in Reykjavík and had become Lára's suitor.

Born November 15, 1845, Jón was four years older than Paul. His father was the Reverend Bjarni Sveinsson, a distinguished scholar educated at the Bessastadir School, who is reported to have read Plato in Greek and to have been as fluent in Latin as in Icelandic. Thanks to his tutelage, Jón, like Paul Thorlaksson, was also taken directly into the second class at the Reykjavík Grammar School.

In his biography of Jón Bjarnason, the Reverend Rúnólfur Marteinsson asserts that Jón probably would have gone to Copenhagen from the Grammar School to study languages and history, had his family had the financial means.[8] Instead, after spending a year at home in eastern Iceland, he returned to Reykjavík the autumn of 1867 and completed the two-year course at the theological seminary there, graduating on August 4, 1869 with highest honours. A few weeks later, on August 29th, Jón was ordained by Bishop Pétur Pétursson so that he might serve as assistant to his father, who was in poor health at that time. After a year, Jón's father recovered his health, however, and no longer needed an assistant. Upon returning to Reykjavík, Jón taught at the Grammar School part-time and engaged in private tutoring, as there were no openings for him in the church. On November 15, 1870, his twenty-fifth birthday, he and Lára were married.

Paul Thorlaksson was now twenty-one, and was envisioning an academic career for himself in Denmark or some other highly developed European country. However, the forces of destiny proved stronger than his early personal inclinations. The wide expanses of America were opening up in the western world, and the latter half of the nineteenth century was to become the great era of migration. Paul Thorlaksson would soon be a part of it.

Emigration from Iceland had begun on a very small scale in 1855 when a small group of people from the Westman Islands, just off the southern coast of Iceland, was converted to the Mormon faith by Thordur Didriksson and a Danish companion. Thordur had been converted by Mormon missionaries he had met in Copenhagen. This little group left Iceland to settle in Utah. Their journey from Iceland to Copenhagen appears to have been uneventful, but the sailing vessel from Copenhagen arrived at Liverpool only after two weeks. Sailing from Liverpool in January of 1856, they were at sea for seven weeks. During the voyage to New York, fifty passengers, almost one out of ten, died and were buried at sea.[9]

During the American Civil War, 1861-1865, Icelanders gave little thought to the United States as an adoptive country, but on January 13, 1865, a meeting was held at Ljósavatn in Sudur-Thingeyjarsýsla to discuss emigration to Brazil. About 150 men declared their interest in the project and a committee of four left to investigate conditions there. The Brazilian government had indicated its interest in subsidizing the Icelanders' passage, at least from Hamburg, but delayed implementing this measure until 1873. By then interest in North America had been re-awakened.

In the early 1870s Sudur-Thingeyjarsýsla became the focal point of agitation for large-scale emigration to the United States. From the standpoint of intellectual activity and political awareness, this region of northern Iceland was probably the most progressive in the country, for as Gunnar Karlsson points out in his doctoral dissertation, it was one of the few districts where men were not absorbed in the winter fishing season, and hence had ample time for reading and discussion.

The spark which kindled this movement was generated, however, in the south of Iceland, not by an Icelander, but by a Dane, one William Wickmann. Wickmann had come to Iceland in 1855 and for the next ten years worked for the Danish trading company Lefoliiverzlun at Eyrarbakki, the only natural harbour on the southern coast of Iceland, where his superior was Gudmundur Thorgrimsen, the factor at Eyrarbakki. In the autumn of 1865 Wickmann left Iceland for Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where his sister was the wife of the Danish consul. He soon purchased a farm on Washington Island near Green Bay in the northwestern part of Lake Michigan. From there he wrote glowing letters to his former employer, Gudmundur Thorgrimsen.[10]

Gudmundur's wife Sólveig and Paul's mother were sisters. Relations between their families were cordial. During Paul's school-days in Reykjavík he visited the Thorgrimsens at Eyrarbakki on several occasions. His father, too, had close contacts with Gudmundur Thorgrimsen.

William Wickmann's letters to Gudmundur encouraged another of Gudmundur's employees to emigrate. Jón Gíslason left Iceland on May 12, 1870, accompanied by three other young men, one of whom had "ridden" (i.e., gained practical medical experience with Dr. Jón Hjaltalín). All four bought farms on Washington Island in Wisconsin. They, too, wrote glowing letters to Gudmundur Thorgrimsen.

Many letters written to the Norwegian papers in America were translated by the editors of *Nordanfari* in Iceland, and the encouraging comments in them played a significant role in making Icelanders aware of the potential opportunities available in the United States.[11] Steamships, moreover, were now crossing the Atlantic in a matter of days rather than the weeks and even months it had taken in sailing vessels. This made the prospect of emigration even more attractive.

Group emigration was the principal topic of discussion among Thorlákur Gunnar Jónsson and his neighbours. Thorlákur's oldest son Haraldur decided to emigrate to America with his wife, María Stefanía. He seems to have made this decision as early as the winter of

1870-1871, but he and his wife delayed their departure until the summer of 1872.

Early in the spring of 1871, a few months before Paul wrote his final examinations in Reykjavík, a letter from his father changed the course of his life. Thorlákur asked Paul whether he would consider giving up his plans to study in Copenhagen. Instead, he suggested, Paul might accompany Haraldur and María to Milwaukee, Wisconsin and make a life for himself in the New World. Dr. Hjaltalín urged Paul to follow his father's advice.

Paul left the Reykjavík Grammar School with a fine testimonial from the Rector Jens Sigurdsson, a brother of the Icelandic statesman Jón Sigurdsson.[12] The original testimonial was composed in Icelandic, but Jens subsequently prepared a version in Latin, an English translation of which follows. History proves that the Rector read his student well.

> At the request of relatives of that most worthy young man, Paul Thorlaksson, who was born on the 19th day before the Kalends of December (November 13th) in the year 1849; for a period of five years, from 1866 until 1871, was a student at our Latin school, and is now about to depart for America; as set forth in the official testimonial, written in the vernacular, which he bears with him, we attest him to be a praiseworthy young man, endowed with an exceptional talent for literary studies, who, during the time he was with us, made remarkable progress in the humanities, as evidenced by the examination he underwent upon being graduated from our school, passing with the highest mark we bestow, i.e. "praiseworthy," nearly all the subjects taught in our school, the humanistic studies he pursued. The high degree of enthusiasm this laudable young man of ours has brought to the study of languages, both ancient and modern, Latin and Greek, English and French, in each of which he is conversant and has composed verse, suggests the influence of Minerva and accords us the best rights to expect his competence in the careful use of these languages, teaching them or in any other respect. We therefore recommend again and again this most distinguished student, who in our school also excelled in moral uprightness, to whatever country he may go.
>
> Reykjavík, 8th day before the ides of June, 1872.
> Jens Sigurdsson
> Rector of the Reykjavík School

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1. Árnór Sigurjónsson, *Eínars saga Ásmundssonar,* I, p. 98 ff. Atli Hrafn Kristinsson calls attention to this passage in an unpublished thesis submitted to the Department of History of the University of Iceland in 1971, entitled "Brefasamband Thorláks frá Stóru-Tjörnum og Tryggva Gunnarssonar."

2. Gunnar Karlsson, "Frelsisbarátta Sudur-Thingeyinga og Jón á Gautlöndum," p. 128.

3. A man of broad cultural interests as well, the Reverend Björn Halldórsson served along with the Reverend Valdimar Briem, Professor Helgi Halfdánarson of the theological college at Reykjavík, and the great national poet, the Reverend Matthias Jochumsson, composer of the text of Iceland's national anthem, on the committee which prepared the new Icelandic hymnal of 1886. From 1908 until 1916 Björn's son Thorhallur was Bishop of Iceland. The latter's daughter Dora is fondly remembered as the charming wife of Ásgeir Ásgeirsson, second President of the Republic of Iceland, who held that office from 1952 until 1968.

4. Palli is a baby name or diminutive for Páll (Paul).

5. In the original Icelandic this is a pun on the words *mörlandanna* (suet eaters) and *Norlandanna* (people from northern Iceland).

6. In a group picture taken at the Grammar School in 1868, Paul is one of the smallest students in his class. There must have been some concern about his growth because he was then in his nineteenth year. However, he apparently grew quite rapidly after that because as a man he attained an average size.

7. Jón Bjarnason, who had already been ordained, and taught on an hourly basis in Reykjavík at the time, also studied Hebrew with Gísli Magnússon. He did not, however, devote as much time to it as did Paul Thorlaksson and acknowledged this fact in his commemorative booklet on the founding of the Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod in America (*Minningarrit Hins ev. lút. kirkjufélags Íslendinga í Vesturheimi, 1885-1910*).

8. Rúnólfur Marteinsson, *Aevisaga sérá Jóns Bjarnasonar,* p. 9.

9. Excerpts from the travel diary of Thordur Didriksson (*Almanck,* O.S. Thorgeirsson, ed.). The Mormons began proselyting activity in Denmark as early as 1850.

10. Washington Island, in the northwest part of Lake Michigan, has an area of approximately twenty square miles; its greatest length is seven miles and maximum width, five miles.

11. See the issue of November 24, 1871, for example.

12. A statue of Jón Sigurdsson stands on the Manitoba Legislative grounds in Winnipeg.

II

Off to America

PAUL SPENT THE WINTER of 1871-1872 at Stóru-Tjarnir, preparing several boys for the entrance examinations of Reykjavík Grammar School. From a letter he wrote on January 31, 1872 to the Reverend Daniel Halldórsson, a rural dean *(prófastur)* of the state church and father of one of his pupils, it is evident that Paul enjoyed teaching and was gratified at the progress the boys were making. If he decided to follow his father's advice, emigration would mean a significant shift in the direction of his life. As it turned out, he took the advice. Had he not, there is little doubt that his name would have been less well known.

Early the next summer four young people set out on horseback from Ljósavatnshreppur, passing through Akureyri and Reykjavík on their way to Eyrarbakki on the south coast. They were Paul Thorlaksson, his brother Haraldur, the latter's wife María Stefanía, and Árni (Bjarni) Sveinbjörnsson, brother of the composer of Iceland's national anthem, Sveinbjörn Thordarson Sveinbjörnsson. At Eyrarbakki they were joined by others, including Gudmundur Thorgrimsen's nineteen-year-old son Hans B. Thorgrimsen, cousin to Paul and Haraldur, who intended to learn farming on Washington Island under the tutelage of William Wickmann, but gave up after a year to study theology. In 1885 Hans was responsible for uniting the Icelandic congregations in the United States and Canada into the Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod of North America.

There were fifteen adults and two young girls in the group that left Eyrarbakki on June 13, 1872. Sources are divided as to whether one or three of the adults were women, but there must have been at least two, Gudrún Ingvarsdóttir, the betrothed of Gudmundur

Haraldur Thorlaksson and his wife, María Stefanía Sigurdardóttir, and their five children, 1900. *Standing (left to right):* Lovisa Björg, Gunnar, Páll, Pálína, Ásta. Five other children had died by 1897. Haraldur helped Paul unstintingly in Paul's attempts to save the colonists in North Dakota from starving.

Gudmundsson who was already established on Washington Island, and María Stefanía, the wife of Haraldur Thorlaksson. The travellers sailed from Liverpool on July 2, 1872 and arrived at Quebec City on July 15th.

Paul's first letter home to his father reported that the crossing had, for the most part, been a pleasant experience. Árni Gudmundsson, another of the party, later recalled that when a seaman on the passage from Liverpool asked for recommendation as a guide for immigrants, Paul Thorlaksson provided him with one—"in English, Danish, German, French, Latin and Greek."[1] At this time Paul was only in his twenty-fourth year, yet his knowledge must have been prodigious.

From Quebec the immigrants continued by rail to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a pleasant city on the western shore of Lake Michigan, which had already been the destination of many Germans and Norwegians. Most of Paul's travelling companions from Iceland continued on to Washington Island, but Paul, Haraldur and María were among those who opted to try their luck in the city.

At first they boarded at the home of a Dane named Kreyser who had formerly been employed at Eyrarbakki, where Paul had made his acquaintance. Toward the end of August, however, Paul, Haraldur and María teamed up with three other Icelanders who had arrived that summer to rent and furnish a house. Their companions in this small "co-operative society" were Jón Halldórsson, Jónas Jónsson and Jóhannes Árngrimsson. They were subsequently joined by two others.

Rent for the three-room house was $5.00 a month. Paul handled the accounts and María was housekeeper and cook, for which she was paid $4.00 a week. Each member of the household with the exception of María paid $3.00 a week to cover the rent and cost of the food. In the beginning each one contributed $7.00 to buy furnishings. Jón Halldórsson reported it was a marvel how much could be had for so small an amount, and Jóhannes Árngrimsson said they maintained a better table than any official he had ever encountered in Iceland.

Paul wrote to his father: "We are as pleased with life as can be; although we have not yet begun to earn much money we have made some progress in familiarizing ourselves with the customs and way of life, and are independent. We have enough to start housekeeping and, while there is still a great deal to be done, our hopes are high."[2]

In the same letter Paul reports having found his brother a job in a lumberyard. It wasn't easy, he told his father, since Haraldur had no knowledge of English, but he had begun to learn both the language and a trade and was earning $1.25 a day. For his own part, Paul wrote, he was working in a barrel factory, ten hours on weekdays and nine on Saturdays.

While looking over the city a few days after their arrival, Paul, Haraldur and María met a German pastor, the Reverend N. Fr. Wiese. Pastor Wiese became a very good friend to the little group of Icelanders in the city. Indeed, Thorstina Walters calls him "a veritable Moses who helped to lead them out of the wilderness that surrounded them, strangers in a new land that they hoped to adopt as their own."[3]

Some historians have attributed Paul's decision to study for the ministry to the influence of Rev. Wiese. It may well have been Pastor Wiese who introduced Paul to one or two Norwegian pastors through whom he gained entrée to the rural Norwegian communities in the vicinity of Milwaukee. Paul lost no time making friends among the Norwegians. In the first place, his mother was half Norwegian and, next to Icelandic, Norwegian was the language in which he was most fluent. The Norwegians, moreover, were well established in Wisconsin and were able to provide him with the type of information in which his father was interested. The descendants of Thorlákur Gunnar Jónsson claim that Thorlákur wanted a first-hand report from Paul before deciding definitely to emigrate from Iceland with the rest of his family.

On September 18, 1872 Paul wrote his father a letter which Thorlákur passed on with a covering letter dated February 3, 1873 to the editor of *Nordanfari*. The most salient portion of Paul's letter is concerned with a trip he made into the countryside to visit a Norwegian pastor he had met:

> He welcomed me cordially and I rode with him in his wagon to church and attended his service. The church was attractive and the singing good. There was organ music, too. The organ is beside the pulpit, up near the altar. The first hymn was "Merciful Saviour." The men sat on the right side of the church, the women on the left.[4] After the service the pastor drove me a good part of the way back. Along with us in the wagon was a well-to-do Norwegian farmer, one of the pastor's flock who, he told me, enjoyed an income of between eight and ten thousand dollars a year and owned his farm outright. There are others in the congregation just as prosperous if not more so, an indication that the financial circumstances of congregations here are an improvement over those in Iceland. Here they pay the pastor a stipend, build a church and school as well as a parsonage,

> and pay a salary to the teacher. It is almost beyond belief what the Norwegians have accomplished here in so short a time. They have, for instance, built a Latin School which cost $80,000, even though they first set foot here barely thirty years ago.[5] Their prosperity is derived entirely from the land, which is far more productive than the soil of our cold Iceland. I stopped overnight at a Norwegian farm, had an excellent night's lodging, and was not permitted to pay for it. The farmer there owned six cows, sixteen pigs and four horses. He has a farm of one hundred acres and produces wheat, rye, potatoes and corn as well as sufficient hay. He told me that using a scythe one man could mow twenty horse-loads of hay in a single day, but with a horse-drawn mower, up to 200 loads.

Paul noted that the Icelandic settlers on Washington Island had written to advise him they were doing well, but that in their opinion the island was somewhat too thickly wooded. He added that he imagined it was not an ideal place for a poor man to begin farming, for there was so much to be done before the land could become productive.

Even before Paul's account of Norwegian prosperity in Wisconsin was published, it evoked a strong reaction from Thorlákur Gunnar Jónsson and his friends, dispelling any doubts they might have had about the feasibility of beginning anew in a strange land.

A group of Thorlákur's neighbours urged him to call a meeting to discuss the possibilities of emigrating in a large group. At a meeting held at Stóru-Tjarnir on January 11, 1873, a circular letter was drafted in Thorlákur's name, to be distributed throughout the district, summoning interested persons to a meeting at the farmstead Eyjadalsá in Bardardal on January 24th. At the meeting there, presided over by Thorlákur and attended by forty-two farmers, it was decided that those interested in emigrating to America unite in a society to be organized for that purpose. Thorlákur was unanimously appointed the society's chairman.

In February 1873 a joint meeting was held at Akureyri with men from Eyjafjardarsýsla, the next district to the west. This meeting was ostensibly called to discuss the state of the economy and progress of negotiations with Denmark for a constitution, but the main topics discussed were the arrangements for group travel and the disposal of the emigrants' principal asset, their livestock, before setting out.

On this occasion Tryggvi Gunnarsson, purchasing agent of the first co-operative society formed in Iceland, the Gránufélag, was commissioned to seek markets abroad for Icelandic horses and sheep; his brother Eggert was delegated to promote membership in the Icelandic Patriotic Society; and Thorlákur was called upon to promote the cause of group emigration to America.

These three men rode together from Akureyri to Reykjavík, holding meetings at farmsteads along the way. Tryggvi sailed to Scotland to find purchasers for the livestock, while Eggert and Thorlákur rode long days on horseback across southern and eastern Iceland, acquainting farmers with the measures being taken on behalf of prospective emigrants. They travelled at their own expense and were on the move for ten weeks.

Tryggvi Gunnarsson made arrangements in Scotland for a ship to come to Akureyri in the summer to take the emigrants to Glasgow, on the first leg of their voyage to America. The emigrants assembled at Akureyri at the appointed time, but the ship, the *SS Queen,* used primarily for transporting horses for the British coal mines, did not arrive for almost another six weeks. Food and lodging at Akureyri were expensive and depleted the resources of some of the travellers. The *SS Queen* sailed at last the evening of August 4, 1873 and the party arrived at Quebec on the *SS Manitoban* of the Allan Line on August 25th.

Paul Thorlaksson, in the meantime, had begun to study theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri. Paul's letter to his father about the Norwegian achievement in Wisconsin, which Thorlákur had sent to the editor of *Nordanfari,* stimulated his countrymen's interest in America. But, in subsequent letters that Paul wrote specifically for publication in that paper, he particularly stressed that emigrants to America should not expect miracles to happen there. Under no circumstances could he have been accused of being a propagandist for the United States. The sensible advice he gave his countrymen before they left home and his efforts on their behalf both prior to and after their arrival in America are clearly delineated in two letters of his to *Nordanfari,* written January 27th and October 18th, 1873. One can also find in these not only Paul's practical common sense, but also his forthrightness and desire to paint a fair and honest picture. In addition, his superior qualities of leadership show throughout.

Concordia University, St. Louis, Mo., January 27, 1873
To the Editor of *Nordanfari:*

If you will be kind enough to print the following lines in your paper, it may be that many of my fellow countrymen will enjoy having some news from the far west. I have the impression that many, or at least not so few of my countrymen are thinking of coming here as immigrants. When my thoughts turn to Iceland I imagine the many questions they would like to ask. Among the first would be whether it is really better here than in Iceland. I cannot help feeling that question to be pointless and impossible to answer. That I consider the question pointless is, it goes without saying, a consequence of the knowledge and experience I have gained here. For my part, I find it difficult to find any point on which this country can be compared to Iceland, either with respect to the economy and the productivity of the land or even the form of government.

It is a true saying that "everyone sees silver through his own eyes," and were I to answer this question to everyone's satisfaction I would have to have the eyes and tastes of all men.

One likes this and another is pleased with that. One man will wear ragged clothes even though he can afford better. Another will emigrate precipitously; it's all the same to him if he lives in a mud hut—for others that would be unthinkable. One man is satisfied with rather poor living conditions; another wants to live well, and so on.

I say to you, "Come over here. Everything is better here." You say, "No, things are much better where I am." To a certain extent both of us are telling the truth, yet who can make a decision on this basis? The better becomes the worse and the worse the better. (It must be realized that when I say "here," I do not mean the United States in general. Wisconsin is in the United States, but what holds true for Wisconsin is not necessarily true of the entire country. The State of Wisconsin, on the western shore of Lake Michigan, is probably known to my readers by name only, and when we use the word "here," it refers mainly to Wisconsin.)

Under the circumstances it would perhaps be best to give a few concrete examples, actual instances (facta), so that each may decide for himself.

At the beginning of any new undertaking it is generally found that some are in favour of it and some opposed. Many of those who come here or want to come are only too willing to believe all the good they hear, but less willing to believe anything unfavourable. On the other hand, there are not a few who oppose this project and collect all the ugly reports which support their prejudices and serve to frighten others. Then there are those who have no actual knowledge at all, but declare "It's all foolishness." Some of those who give only a little thought to the matter come up with all kinds of crazy notions, either to the effect that men live here like the yolk in an egg, without any effort, or that their only sustenance, for instance, consists of potatoes. In their scepticism some claim that the Icelanders were forced to write the letters they sent from here, and so on—"You can't believe any of it."

Some oppose this "vagrancy," as they call it, on the grounds that the entire labour force will eventually have left the country, leaving behind only helpless indigents. That is conceivable, but what do those holding that view propose that the labour force do? That the men go to sea? If they do not go to sea, they must have something to do. If they come here they will find more productive land and can better themselves. They are not, moreover, such reprobates that they would not willingly extend a helping hand to their mother country. Isn't that better than being considered paupers whom the Danes must look after?

Even though it should transpire that people leave Iceland in large groups at a time, is it a certainty that the country will disintegrate? It is noteworthy that after thirty years of emigration from Norway that country appears to stand as firmly as before, even though there will soon be as many Norwegians in the United States as in Norway itself.

In that short time the achievements of the Norwegians in the United States have been incredible. Little by little they have banded together, organized congregations, built churches and elementary schools, established a synod and a Latin school in the state of Iowa, called Luther College, which cost the Norwegian congregations $87,000. They bear all the costs themselves.

What message has this for us? That these people are persevering and hard working, yes, certainly, but are there not other connotations? Foreigners now say about us Icelanders that we are so badly off because we lack the will to do anything about it; we drink and live in squalor just for the sake of preserving our national identity. Now there is some truth in this, but laziness and lack of enterprise are the real culprits. Or else the Americans' prosperity is entirely due to their enterprise. No, the land does its part and the sower his. If the sower is incompetent, he has little profit from the land, and if the land is barren, the sower sows in vain. While the land here is fertile, it nevertheless needs to be cultivated. It does not bestow its gifts freely, but demands hard work and diligence on the part of its owners. No one lives in idleness here; should there be any who believe otherwise, they ought to give this place as wide a berth as they would hot flames.

This past year there has been a great influx of people from Europe and other continents. 293,333 entered the country through New York alone, for instance, in addition to the masses of people who landed at Quebec, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New Orleans and Galveston. Of the number mentioned above about 130,000 came from Germany alone. Thirty thousand Russians have arranged to settle in Texas and have sent men on ahead to buy land on their behalf. Fifty farmers from Saxony in Germany recently purchased farms in the state of Michigan.

It would be best for immigrants, especially Icelanders, not to try immediately to go it on their own, but rather to apply themselves first to acquiring as much essential knowledge as possible and not be too greedy or ambitious, for that is not to their advantage. At the same time, however, they should not allow themselves to be imposed upon. Men should be cautious when making purchases and not believe all the fine words of the people of this country. It often happens here, perhaps to a greater extent than elsewhere, that the merchant, salesman and agent advertise in the newspapers and proclaim the house for sale to be the best and most inexpensive of its kind in the world; to praise it less highly would be an injustice to it, but if anyone buys this priceless treasure he usually sees afterward how thoroughly he has been cheated. Only immigrants are victimized in this way; the natives are cautious and the merchants know they cannot cheat them.

Everyone knows how essential it is for those coming here to have some knowledge of surveying [appraising].

In addition to English, German is spoken very widely. One can also make good use of Danish and Norwegian. By and large, most of the world's languages are spoken here, but our beloved Icelandic probably by the smallest number of people.

If we Icelanders establish a colony here it appears not at all unlikely that we might in time increase our numbers, prosper and attain a more advantageous position in the ranks of peoples and, with all our other good qualities, greater prominence on the stage of history. The colonial environment is, however, poorly suited to the preservation of national identity. Many people will protest that emigration will serve only to corrupt the language and divide the people, so that with the passage of time Icelanders will be absorbed by people of other nationalities. This is conceivable but, to my way of thinking, not inevitable. As long as Iceland continues to be more than just a wasteland of glaciers, lava and sand, there will always be people living there. I suspect, moreover, the inhabitable districts will be fully populated, despite emigration on a small scale. Then too, I hope that Icelanders here will be legally enabled to preserve their language if they have their own newspapers, teachers and pastors, as do the Norwegians, and that in addition to this they will exchange newspapers with the island of their fathers. In this way greater opportunities could be developed for Icelandic authors, so that those who feel the call to write something of benefit to their people will not have to turn on their heels and hasten to write in another language.

There is much more to be said, but I shall not permit myself the time on this occasion.

Paul Thorlaksson

The second letter voices the same cautious tone and subdued optimism. Also, as before, he takes the pragmatic approach.

October 18, 1873

To the Editor of *Nordanfari:*

. . . The first letters to reach me last spring contained the news that some 500 people were planning to leave Iceland this past summer for the United States. Three men wrote me on behalf of the prospective immigrants, requesting me to look for and purchase suitable farms for them. I declined for the following reasons: 1) I did not consider myself qualified to select farm properties, for in order to do this successfully it is necessary to have more than a little knowledge and to make a choice for 500 men, perhaps to suit 500 individual tastes, was, in view of my limited knowledge of farming, a greater responsibility than I cared to assume; 2) It is my conviction that Icelandic farmers have insufficient experience to set about acquiring land for themselves immediately; they are not familiar with agricultural methods here and know nothing of the nature of the soil nor of procedures in general; 3) Most of the Icelandic immigrants probably do not have enough resources to establish themselves on a farm as soon as they come here.

After discussing the matter with reliable and well-informed men, I suggested that our fellow countrymen who come here first work as hired help for one to three years, familiarize themselves with farming methods and business procedures, earn as much money as possible and, at the same time, learn through experience to appraise the value and suitability of land so they might eventually, as a group, be in a position to purchase desirable land, move onto it and, in this way, establish the first Icelandic colony.

More than a little is to be gained through acquiring knowledge and understanding of one's work before starting on one's own, and if Norwegian farmers, for instance, find it necessary to study the farm-

> ing methods here, it is no less necessary for Icelandic farmers to do the same.
>
> This is not to imply that Norwegian or even Icelandic farmers cannot and have not been able to manage when they started on their own. I would, however, point out that Norwegian farmers have told me they did not regret having worked as hired help for "Yankee" farmers before starting on their own, for during that time they learned much that proved of incalculable value later on. There have been Norwegian farmers in this area for many years, a good number of whom have become quite wealthy, owning properties worth from $20,000 to $70,000. As farmers they are every whit as capable as the so-called "Yankees." Since this is the case, what could be more appropriate than for the Icelanders coming here to learn in turn from the Norwegians?[6]
>
> This is what I had in mind when I was unwilling to look for land for the immigrants but, instead, promised to try to find temporary homes for them in Norwegian Lutheran parishes in Wisconsin and Minnesota. I wrote at once to the president of the largest Norwegian Lutheran church organization here, the Synod of Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Churches in America, popularly known as "The Norwegian Synod," inquiring whether 500 Icelanders might stay for a time in the Norwegian parishes in Wisconsin and Minnesota until they had acquired enough knowledge of farming methods here to enable them to make a success of their own colony. He replied there was no doubt about it, that the Norwegians would be eager to help their Icelandic brothers.

He then goes on to give a detailed account of the arrival of a boatload of Icelandic colonists.

> As I was expecting them to arrive around the middle of August, I received permission from the college authorities to leave here as early as mid-June to stay with my brother Haraldur in Milwaukee so that, upon receiving more detailed information as to the expected time of their departure and their arrival at Quebec, I could be on hand to meet them and also consult with the pastors as to the number of individuals or families each of them could accommodate in his own congregation. In four Wisconsin congregations I was promised accommodation for forty families and a number of single men. I thought that would be sufficient, for I had learned in the meantime that no more than about 200 people would be coming.
>
> On August 12th I received a cablegram from Glasgow, routed through the Allan Line offices in Montreal and Chicago, advising

that on that day 150 Icelanders were sailing from Glasgow, and bidding me be at Quebec City no later than August 22nd. As soon as the agents for the Allan Line in Chicago received a letter from me stating I was ready to leave, they sent me a complimentary return ticket from Milwaukee to Quebec.

The evening of August 17th I took the steamboat from Milwaukee across Lake Michigan to Grand Haven, a distance of 84 English miles. Because of engine trouble during the night our arrival there was delayed for six hours and we did not land until noon, so I had to wait in Grand Haven until nine o'clock that evening. . . .

I left Grand Haven that evening on the Detroit & Milwaukee Railway. A little after seven the following morning we arrived at its junction with the Grand Trunk Railway, Milwaukee Junction, between Chicago and Quebec. I continued my journey via the Grand Trunk, arriving at Quebec the evening of the 20th. I waited five days at Lévis, frequently gazing down the St. Lawrence River. Early in the morning of the 25th a boy came to the room where I was lodging to tell me that the *Manitoban* had docked with 600 passengers from Glasgow.

I inquired whether there were any Scandinavians aboard, but he replied there were only Frenchmen. I thought that curious, but to make sure, I ran straight down to the dock. At first I found no Icelanders in the throng of people, but upon calling out in Icelandic, asking whether there were any Icelanders there, someone answered "Já." Now I no longer had any doubts. I made my way onto the ship and all at once found myself in the midst of fellow countrymen, friends and relatives. They were all in good health and were collecting their baggage to disembark. Someone with whom they had been in conversation had told them I would probably not be on hand to meet them.

As soon as all of the group were ashore I had a conversation with some of the leaders, advising them of the preparations made for them in Wisconsin. They informed me, however, that 115 of the group of 165 had made up their minds to go to Ontario in Canada, since the Government were offering all who wanted to settle there free railway transportation from Quebec. Although eager to go to Wisconsin, they were going to Ontario first. Upon closer inquiry it came to light that many of them did not have the funds to pay their fare to Wisconsin. Many also wanted to avail themselves of free passage for so great a distance since after three months, they would, if they so desired, be at liberty to move from Ontario into the States. Naturally I was not in a position to assure them that the invitations to stay with Norwegian families would hold good in the middle of winter, and made it clear that those who went to Ontario would have to stay there, at least over the winter months.

I might mention that when we began to arrange with the immigration agents for railway tickets, they had already learned, most likely from the Norwegian interpreter on the ship, that many Icelanders intended to go to Ontario. The Canadian Government are naturally eager to see the land settled, but are having a hard time inducing people to settle there, for most are streaming into the United States. The agents reacted strongly when I mentioned railway tickets to Milwaukee for Icelanders, and asked whether I was going to profit in some way by taking people away from the Canadian Government. I replied that such was not the case and that I was not employed in that capacity. I showed them my authorization from the Allan Line, requested railway tickets for those who had never contemplated going to Ontario, and obtained them. After that it would have been futile for anyone to change his mind; 115 of them took advantage of free passage while the other 50 travelled with me to Wisconsin.

Now he turns to describe the trip south to Milwaukee, which proved to be an adventure.

A few hours later the immigrant train was ready to leave. We boarded it, all the Icelanders together, for we were travelling together as far as Toronto. The train made no stops and nothing of note happened until we were approaching the small town of Cobourg late in the evening of the day after our departure from Quebec. It was dark outside, but the weather was fine and the train was travelling exceptionally fast.

It was then that the wife of Kristin Ólafsson, a farmer from Eyjafjörd, gave birth to a baby. Despite the unsuitability of the surroundings, all went well. The train stopped in Cobourg. We carried the mother and child up to an inn in the town and arranged for her husband and children to stay with her there until she was able to travel again, after which they rejoined the group at Milwaukee.

Upon our arrival at Toronto the next morning the Milwaukee passengers transferred to the rear coaches and were on their own. The Ontario passengers were at the head of the train. The district they were heading for is called Muskoka, some distance northwest of Toronto. The Government was to provide each of them immediately with a house, 200 acres of free land, and more besides. In their company was the Norwegian interpreter from the *Manitoban*, whom they had engaged to accompany them to Muskoka. He had high praise for that district but disparaged the United States. This caused

> frequent arguments between us, for I knew he was not telling the truth about the States and seriously doubted whether his praise of Muskoka was justified. I had virtually no knowledge nor experience of that district, but did know that large groups of people were moving out of Canada into the States. To be sure, I could not be certain that they would be better off coming with me than settling there, so did not let myself become disturbed.
>
> In Toronto the train was separated into two sections; the engine and forward coaches, occupied by the Ontario passengers, continued on, while our coaches were left behind. We were, however, soon on our way again, bound for Fort Sarnia on the international boundary, where we arrived the evening of the 27th and spent the night in the coaches. Next morning the train was ferried on a specially constructed barge made of logs across the St. Clair River, which flows south from Lake Huron, to Port Huron on the western bank. As required by law, the immigrants' baggage was examined. Most heads of families had to pay a charge of ten cents. Those formalities out of the way, we continued on to Milwaukee Junction, where we left the Grand Trunk.
>
> We had to wait until ten o'clock in the evening for the westbound express train from Detroit. Meanwhile the women brewed Icelandic coffee at the Immigration Shed and we drank it with relish. In addition to our fellow countrymen there were Norwegians, Swedes and Germans in the group heading west to Milwaukee. The express train crossed the State of Michigan.

Next he tells the story of the train wreck and we see how his vigilance and concern probably saved several lives.

> We awoke at six o'clock the next morning to find that the train had stopped out in the woods. I got out and walked along up to the engine. Mechanics were removing the large wheels because a connecting rod had broken. In order to make the repairs it had been necessary to bring up another engine from the next station ahead. As I had read so much about the danger of trains crashing into each other when one has to stop between stations, it occurred to me that we might be in such danger now—that a train might come onto us from behind on the same track. Upon making inquiries I learned that a telegram had already been sent from Muir, the next station ahead, to the next station back and that there was no danger. I so advised my fellow countrymen.
>
> The two immigrant coaches had been attached to the rear of the train. Generally the sleeping cars are at the end of the train, for this is

considered to be the safest location. If, for instance, two trains should collide head-on, the forward coaches would sustain the most serious damage. Rear-end collisions do not occur unless something breaks down, causing a train to stand between scheduled stops, but in such cases, as a safety precaution, the passengers always leave the train.

Most of our fellow countrymen were in the rear immigrant coach, only about three or four in the forward one. The weather was good but there was considerable fog and, as I mentioned before, all the passengers were not awake. Around seven o'clock those of us who were in the end coach heard the rumble of wheels behind us, but I thought it must be a train coming to a stop because the engineer was aware of the presence of our train. I therefore had no fear whatever as I stood on the platform between the two immigrant coaches. Upon looking back through the last coach, however, I could see through the doorway at the end that a freight train was swiftly bearing down on us through the fog and was going to crash into our train. I called into the coach and told everyone in God's name to hurry out. Some were already on the move. At the same time I jumped off myself and ran away from the track, for I fully expected the coach to be derailed. Upon turning around again I saw that the freight train was standing where the express train had stood, that the latter had been jolted forward and that the engine of the freight train had crashed into the mid-section of the last coach, lifted the back end of it off the track and demolished it. The next coach was smashed into fragments and the roof hurled off to the side. The other coaches were undamaged and still on the track.

I could hear people moaning and groaning. Beside me was an Icelandic woman whose head was streaming with blood; she had landed on it when she jumped out through the window. I didn't see any other Icelanders and feared many of them had been injured or killed. Upon reaching the coach we had been in, I heard someone asking whether his father and mother were alive; another was inquiring about a brother or sister; one man was asking about his wife, afraid to hear the answer, and a woman, her eyes filled with tears, was searching for her husband. I found out at once that my parents and brothers and sisters were alive, most of them uninjured, and let them know that I was all right. Seven of our group sustained injuries, none of them, however, serious. One, for instance, had a bruised heel, another had his hands scalded by steam. There were some bruises and scratches, but everyone was happy to find himself alive, and in the midst of misfortune there was great joy.

The situation in the next coach was worse. There a Swede named Hed had lost his wife and didn't know what had happened to his two

> daughters, ten and seventeen years old, but feared they were dead. A German had lost his wife and the baby at her breast. The woman had been standing between the second and third cars from the back of the train. It was harrowing to see how the widowers could not be consoled. We Icelanders, who were all alive and, for the most part, uninjured, realized all the more how thankful we should be to the Lord for his protection, for we had been in even greater danger in the end coach where many were still sleeping, among them my father and two brothers, but they were in the undamaged part of the coach and scarcely realized that the trains had collided.
>
> A number of people came from Muir with bottles of brandy to restore those who had been injured in body and spirit and upon our arrival there took excellent care of us all. People outdid themselves in their efforts to be of help. The injured were all taken up to a large inn, where doctors came to attend them. While interpreting for the doctors I came across Hed's daughters. One of them, the elder, was at death's door, and asked me to send for her father; the other had a broken leg, but the doctors were convinced she would be as good as ever afterward. When Hed arrived, the older daughter was dying. Many others were injured seriously but not fatally.
>
> The injured Icelanders were: 1) Eiríkur Hjálmarsson (heel caught between two cars); 2) Stephán Gudmundsson [better known as Stephán G. Stephánsson, the poet] (burns on hands and feet); 3) Sigurbjörg Stefánsdóttir (bruise on the head); 4) Herdís Jónsdóttir (bruised thigh); 5) Kristján Hallgrímsson, a small boy (chin slightly bruised); 6) Ágústa Eínarsdóttir (slight head injury); 7) my sister Jakóbína (one foot black and blue). All these had sufficiently recovered to continue their journey at four that afternoon to Grand Haven. The railway company promised to look after them until they were completely well, even though they went on to Milwaukee.

He concludes by explaining his negotiations with the railroad company for compensation.

> News of the wreck had already reached Milwaukee when we arrived there next morning. I called at once on an attorney whom I knew to be in no way associated with the railway company and sought his advice with regard to the amount of damages the injured might lawfully claim. He advised me to wait to see how well the Milwaukee agents of the company provided treatment and looked after them while they were incapacitated; if they did that satisfactorily, it would not be possible to claim large amounts for injuries no more serious than those sustained. I thereupon called on the

representatives of the company and reported on the injured. They were amenable and replied that of course they would look after them and that the injured could decide for themselves which they preferred, whether to accept a lump sum immediately or have the representatives pay all the costs of their upkeep, medicine and medical care until they had completely recovered. Our countrymen chose the latter alternative.

After a week most of the injured were fully recovered. The agents then called to obtain receipts for all that had been done in their behalf and to compensate them for time lost on account of the wreck. They paid Herdís's husband forty dollars, the amount he claimed over and above the lodging and medical care provided his wife and boy. They paid Sigurbjörg's husband thirty dollars. Stephán Gudmundsson, who was under a doctor's care for an additional week, received thirty dollars, and his father twenty, to compensate him for the time he spent without working, looking after Stephán in Milwaukee. My sister Jakóbína received five dollars for the bruise on her foot and Ágústa ten dollars for the cut on her head. Eiríkur Hjálmarsson was unable to determine an amount as he had not yet fully recovered. Hence the amount of his compensation is still to be decided.

The representatives of the company also paid compensation for all small articles that were damaged. If, for instance, the corner of a shawl had been torn, they paid the owner five dollars, the price of a brand new shawl. They paid me twenty dollars for serving as interpreter. The total amount paid out on that occasion was $250. Now it may be said that the railway company could well afford to pay, even though our demands had been more substantial, but how much better to think in terms of equitable compensation.

After these matters were settled I accompanied several families a distance of 87 English miles out into the country and arranged lodging for them in the congregations served by Pastor Ottesen. The Norwegians welcomed us with open arms and told us their pastor had requested from the pulpit that they welcome any Icelanders who might come their way. The farmers came together and each one took charge of one family. Magnús Gíslason was looked after by Wetle Fedland, Utica P.O., Dane Co., Wisconsin. He was given the use of Fedland's old house together with a cookstove. Fedland planned to provide them with food they could cook themselves, the food to be deducted later from Magnús's wages. Fedland did not say he could provide Magnús with work all winter, but rather that he would be able to find work here and there in the neighbourhood.

Similar arrangements were made for the others. Hallgrímur

Gíslason, Jón Jónsson and Gudmundur Stephánsson are not far from each other.

While I hold in very high esteem the Norwegians with whom our countrymen are staying, I feel it would be unduly optimistic to expect that the Icelanders will like all of them. I think, moreover, that the Icelanders will not feel at home until they have gained some practical experience and mastered the language.

Other Icelandic families as well as some single men have gone out into the Norwegian parishes, but we have not yet had any news of them. I am, however, certain that they will fare better out in the country than had they remained in town, here for instance, in Milwaukee. A Wisconsin pastor now writes me that the three families in his congregation are getting along well. I have heard nothing from those who settled in Ontario.

This past summer about 135 Icelanders came to Milwaukee. Two babies were born there and two on the journey west, while one man died, an elderly man from Hrútafjörd named Thordur. Pastor Jón Bjarnason and his wife, Lára Petursdóttir, recently arrived here in St. Louis from Reykjavík.

Yours,
Paul Thorlaksson

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1. C.B. Eaton, *Washington Island 1836-1876,* p. 58.

2. Th. Th. Thorsteinsson, *Vestmenn,* p. 54 f.

3. Thorstina Walters, *Modern Sagas. The Story of the Icelanders in North America,* p. 36.

4. Such was also the custom in Iceland. This would have reassured Thorlákur that the Norwegian Lutherans in Wisconsin were thoroughly "orthodox" in their practices. Paul Sigurdson, who grew up in the Icelandic community at Brown, Manitoba, remembers this custom at services held there as late as the 1940s and most of the people had come from the Mountain, North Dakota area in 1899.

5. The reference here is to Luther College at Decorah, Iowa.

6. Paul's comments on the experiences of the Norwegian farmers are corroborated by E.C. Nelson and E.L. Fevold. In their work *The Lutheran Church among Norwegian Americans* (p. 62) they state: "The [Norwegian] immigrants were a hardy lot, unafraid of honest toil. However, the early settlers were something less than 'amply able' when it came to judging the quality of the land on which they settled. Professor Blegen has pointed out that the 'Yankees' were more shrewd and less apt to select marginal, left-over lands. Slow in understanding the true value of prairie land, the Norwegians had made some poor choices, notably Beaver Creek and Muskego. But once the lessons of these experiences were assimiliated, they, too, began to choose with discrimination."

III

Putting Down New Roots

In the minds of Icelandic immigrants of the 1870s, there was never any question of the desirability of establishing a homogeneous Icelandic community in North America. The only question was one of priorities.

More cautious than most of his fellow Icelanders, Paul Thorlaksson urged his countrymen to learn about unfamiliar farming methods by first working for others before attempting to become independent farmers themselves. Only in this way, he contended, could a prosperous Icelandic community become a reality.

Some of his contemporaries, however, were motivated by other considerations, to them equally compelling. If an Icelandic community was not established without delay, they feared, the Icelandic immigrants would soon lose their sense of identity through prolonged contact with people of other national origins. Furthermore, a homogeneous rural Icelandic settlement would serve as a buffer against the worst effects of the economic depression which began in the United States in 1873, swiftly spread to Canada, and lasted until 1876.

The second administration of President Ulysses S. Grant, which began on March 4, 1873, was riddled with corruption on an unprecedented scale and there was widespread doubt that the United States Treasury would be able to meet its obligations. Scandals in the highest echelons of government followed one another in close succession. With the failure of the Wall Street firm of J. Cooke & Co. the overexpanded American economy collapsed. Railway construction came to a halt. Corporations formed to carry out ambitious projects either failed or suspended operations. Many factories closed down completely or curtailed production drastically. Unemployment was widespread.

Almost half the Icelanders in Milwaukee had only occasional jobs. C.B. Eaton cites a passage from a letter Árni Gudmundsson wrote to his parents from Milwaukee in the autumn of 1873:

> I don't like it that they have started sending us paupers from Iceland now. One came here from Hrútafjordur, sent by the local authorities there, with his pregnant wife and three small children. He didn't have a penny when he got here, he is in bad health, is a poor worker, doesn't know the language—and yet these men are expected not only to survive but to get rich. And if things go wrong—which is not unlikely—these men say foul things about America. I really don't know what will happen to this fellow this winter, and to many like him. They managed to work enough to get through the summer, but in this city there is little or no work during the winter and these poor wretches can't go anyplace else.[1]

Just as badly off, if not worse, as the Milwaukee Icelanders were those unfortunates who had been enticed by Canadian immigration officials to accept free transportation from Quebec to Rosseau, on the edge of the rocky Laurentian Shield in the Muskoka district of Ontario. Of them the late Mr. Will Kristjanson wrote in *The Icelandic People in Manitoba:*

> They were assured by an immigration official that there would be employment there while they were establishing themselves on the excellent free lands that awaited them 'as a beautiful bride waits impatiently for her bridegroom'. After some inspection the party selected a site six miles to the east of the village of Rosseau as being the best available, although it was a wilderness of heavy timber and rocks, under water in spring and fall. . . . The greater number were without means and, under the circumstances, it was too late in the season to move onto the land.[2]

The much-vaunted employment amounted to six weeks cutting cordwood at seventy-five cents a cord. Some obtained temporary farm work and later in the season men were able to earn about fifty cents a day on construction of a government road to the proposed Icelandic settlement. "February," Mr. Kristjanson continued, "saw the end of government employment, and some of the settlers began to clear their lands, while others dispersed to different parts of the province. Some obtained temporary work at sawmills, but employment was unstable, and many left for Wisconsin, only to find conditions there similar."[3]

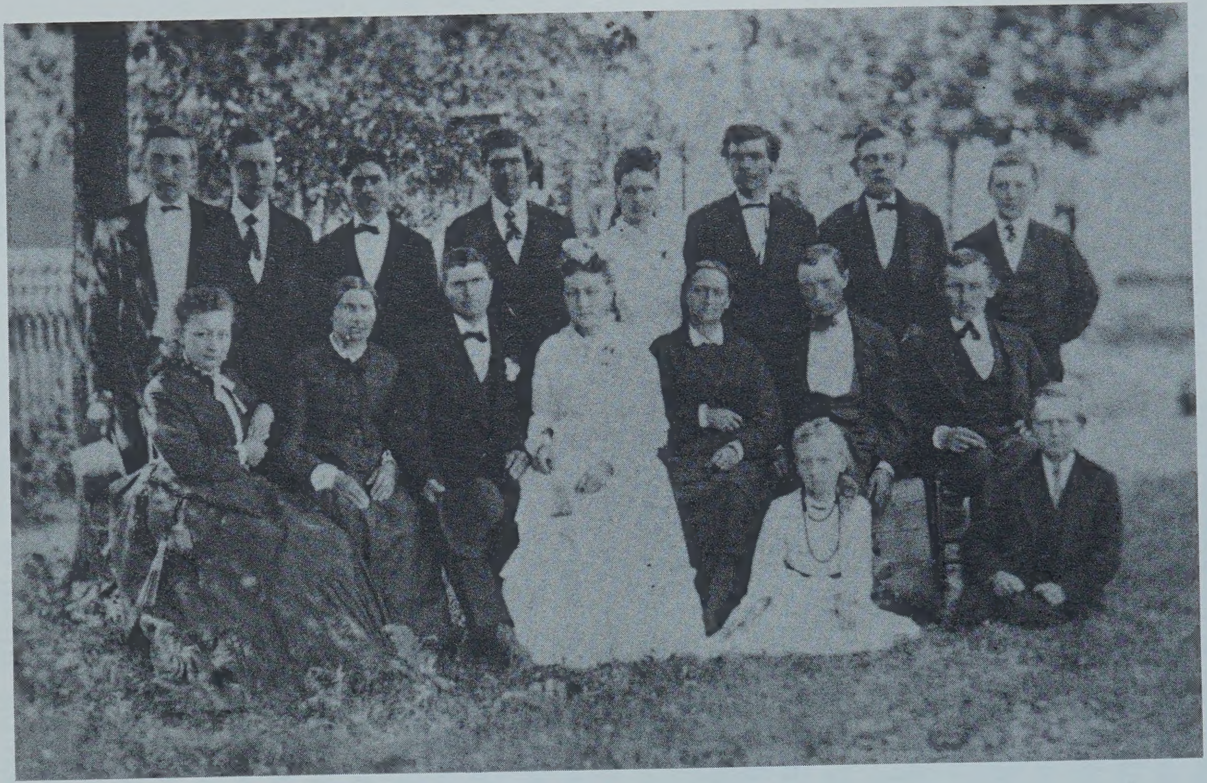
The destitution of the Icelanders who had been taken in by the blandishments of Canadian immigration authorities is described first-hand by Vigfús Sigurdsson, a bookbinder who had spent the winter of 1873-1874 at Rosseau. In January 1875 he wrote from Parry Sound, Ontario to the editor of *Nordanfari*. What he writes shows clearly that Paul Thorlaksson did not concern himself solely with those Icelanders in his charge, but also considered it his responsibility to help any of his countrymen and others, no matter where they happened to be.

> It would have been disastrous indeed for the poorest people at Rosseau last winter had Benedikt Jónsson (Bardal) from Vegeirsstadir in Fnjóskadal not extended small loans to most of them, even though he was no better off than some of the others who did nothing at all to help. Unexpected aid also came from the student Paul Thorlaksson, who had the nobility of mind to forward, unbidden, monies collected at his suggestion among the Norwegians for relief of the Icelanders. He assisted them in other ways as well, for which he can never be adequately thanked.[4]

Independent farmers cultivating their own land were cushioned to some extent against the most disastrous effects of the economic debacle throughout Canada as well as in the States. Those least able to cope with it were the newly arrived immigrants in both countries, people of extremely limited or nonexistent financial means. Most of the Icelanders were in the latter category, but those whom Paul Thorlaksson had settled on Norwegian farms were more fortunate than most of the others.

One of this group, Jón Jónsson, described his circumstances in a letter to his friend Thorlákur Gunnar Jónsson, written at De Forest, Wisconsin on New Year's Day, 1874. Jón mentions that his host, Andres Petersen, first accommodated him and his family in Petersen's own home. Then, upon the arrival of a threshing team, he arranged for them to stay with his widowed sister until he could set them up in another house he owned. Jón's first job in America was helping the threshers. His letter continues:

> The farmers here are prosperous. Wherever I have been, I encountered farmers who own livestock of every description: cattle, sheep, pigs and horses, chickens, geese and big coarse-looking birds they call turkeys. They are also enjoying a good income from the fields they have sown with wheat. I believe a good average farmer produces



The Thorlaksson family at the wedding of Rannveig (Paul's sister) to Tönnes Miller, 1875. All eleven members of the Thorlaksson family are in the picture. *Back Row:* On extreme left — Paul. At right — Jón, Niels and Thorstein. *Front Row:* Gudrún, groom's mother, groom, bride, Lovisa (bride's mother), Thorlákur (bride's father) and Haraldur. *On the Grass:* Sólveig and Björn.

> about 2000 bushels as well as other varieties of grain. They have told me they are growing barley, oats, malt and corn on their land. It is being said now that if there isn't much to do before the end of March there will be plenty of work then. . . . Some of our neighbours have dropped in, bringing us provisions of various kinds, flour, pork and milk. On occasion I have been invited to their homes and upon leaving was given milk, flour, carrots and potatoes. One Sunday a Norwegian girl came to call on us, sent by her employer, an American, who lives two miles away, to inquire whether we were in need of anything. At the time we had very little, as we had just settled in. Two days later he called on us himself and brought us practically a quarter of beef.[5]

The hospitality of the Norwegians was not, however, inexhaustible. In some cases it was offered for a period of one year only, but even where this was not the case, the Icelanders were eager to be on their own rather than wear out their welcome.

Free government land for homesteading was no longer available in Wisconsin. In 1874, the closest to be had was in western Nebraska, a state admitted to the Union in 1867.

The first Icelanders to visit Nebraska were Torfi Bjarnarson and younger brother Lárus, who arrived in Milwaukee from Iceland on June 4, 1873. Torfi had studied at an agricultural school in Denmark and intended to establish an Icelandic colony in America. After a very short stop in Milwaukee Torfi and Lárus continued their journey west. They found that all the free land in Iowa and eastern Nebraska had already been settled. There was still some in western Nebraska, but at a minimum distance of twenty to fifty miles from the railway. There was no indication that a branch line was being planned. Some years later, Lárus reported their having observed herds of bison roaming the prairies in the area to which they had been directed.

Torfi abandoned the idea of settling on free land and purchased a small farm in the eastern part of the state, about eight miles south of Lincoln, the capital, where he ploughed some ten to twelve acres. He soon gave up his farm, however, and late in September of 1873 passed through Milwaukee again on his way home to Iceland. He was closely questioned in Milwaukee about his experiences farther west. He praised the quality of the land in Nebraska, but cautioned his countrymen against settling in uninhabited country, far from a railway. America's loss was Iceland's gain, for in 1880 Torfi became principal of the newly established agricultural school, the first in Iceland, at Ólafsdal in Dalasýsla.

Lárus Bjarnarson remained in America to work on a farm not far from his brother's property which, on Torfi's departure, reverted to the railway company. Later on, however, he bought a farm for himself in eastern Nebraska, as did his brother Albert.

In the spring of 1874, at the instigation of several enterprising men, the Icelanders in Milwaukee organized a society. One of its aims was to find a suitable site farther west for a colony where all the Icelanders already in America could settle and which would be sufficiently large to accommodate future immigrants from Iceland as well. Elected chairman of the society was Ólafur Ólafsson from Espiholl in Eyjafjörd, who had come to America in the same group with Thorlákur Gunnar Jónsson.

At a meeting held early in the summer of 1874 it was decided to send two men to obtain first-hand information on the situation in Nebraska. No doubt, it was understood that they would consult with Lárus and Albert Bjarnarson. Sigfús Magnússon and Jón Halldórsson set out on May 5th, almost two months before Paul Thorlaksson returned to Milwaukee from St. Louis to spend the summer vacation with his parents. Sigfús's and Jón's travel expenses were probably subsidized by the Burlington & Missouri Railroad, which owned large tracts of land in Iowa and Nebraska.

The travellers learned that most of the government land in western Nebraska (i.e., every other section) had now been taken up by people of other nationalities. All that was left in Iowa and Nebraska was railroad land, which cost between $3.00 and $12.00 an acre, a price most of the Icelanders in Milwaukee could not afford. For the past two or three years, moreover, Nebraska had been devastated by a plague of grasshoppers.

Jón Halldórsson bought a farm in southern Nebraska and within a few years several other Icelanders settled in that region, but they were never numerous. Sigfús Magnússon returned to Iceland in the autumn of 1874.[6]

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1. C.B. Eaton, *Washington Island 1836-1876,* p. 64.
2. Will Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba: A Manitoba Saga,* p. 17 f.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Th. Th. Thorsteinsson refers to this letter of Vigfús Sigurdsson's on p. 202 of *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi,* Volume II, then again on p. 217, where he says that although there is no specific proof, it is safe to assume that Thorlaksson also arranged for financial assistance to unemployed Icelanders in Milwaukee that winter. The funds contributed by the Norwegians, he maintains, were more likely to have been originally intended for the relief of Icelanders in the United States than for the aid of Icelanders in Canada.

5. Jónsson to Jónsson, Lbs 2595, 4to., Manuscript Collection, National Library of Iceland, Reykjavík.

6. Rögnvaldur Pétursson, "Landskodunarferdin til Alaska 1874," *Tímarit* XVI (1954): 16.

IV

COMMON SENSE PREVAILS

THE WISCONSIN ICELANDERS were now aware of the impediments to establishing an exclusively Icelandic settlement in the United States in the foreseeable future, and they divided into two groups.

On the one hand were the individuals and families who had gained experience in the winter of 1873-1874 by working for Norwegian farmers in Wisconsin. Among this group were some of Thorlákur Gunnar Jónsson's former neighbours and close friends from Sudur-Thingeyjarsýsla. These men and women, sober realists who "cut their coat according to their cloth," began to consider the possibility of settling among their Norwegian friends. They quietly discussed their ideas with Thorlákur and his son Paul, but made no effort to convert other Icelanders to their point of view.

The other faction, however, those who adhered to the belief that Icelandic identity in North America could be preserved only in isolation from foreign influences, was openly critical of its compatriots who would "desert the flock." They became convinced they had found a spokesman and inspired leader in the young Icelandic writer, Jón Ólafsson.

Ólafsson, a brother of the poet Páll Ólafsson, was born in the east of Iceland on March 20, 1850. He published his first book, consisting of a story and some poems, in 1867 while still a student at the Reykjavík Grammar School. A year later, at the age of eighteen, he became editor of the Icelandic periodical *Baldur*. In 1870 he had to flee to Norway because of a scathing attack he had printed against Danish officialdom in Iceland. He was permitted to return to Iceland in 1872, but a year later fled to America to avoid arrest for treason.

Jón Ólafsson appears to have spent most of the year 1873 in Wisconsin, but in New York he had met an attorney and former naval officer, Marston Niles, who had a keen interest in Iceland and the Icelandic people.

A volatile patriot but impressionable and with little or no understanding of the realities of economics, Jón Ólafsson entertained dreams of transporting the entire population of Iceland away from Danish oppression to a "New Iceland" in the western hemisphere. This grandiose scheme became his consuming obsession.

Marston Niles, who wielded some influence in the upper echelons of the Republican Party in the United States, appears to have seen some sense in the plan. In 1867 William H. Seward, Secretary of State under Presidents Lincoln and Andrew Johnson, had purchased the territory of Alaska from Russia for the sum of $7,200,000. Believed by the general public to consist of nothing more than a barren, Arctic wasteland, Alaska was popularly referred to as "Seward's Folly" and "Seward's Icebox." But Niles set out to persuade some high-ranking government officials, including George Maxwell Robeson, Secretary of the Navy at that time, of the advantages that could accrue to the country and enhance the reputation of the Republican Party if arrangements could be made to move the population of Iceland en masse to the territory of Alaska. Any favourable publicity at this time was welcomed, for it would help deflect attention from the unceasing scandals being uncovered in government circles.

Had Jón Ólafsson succeeded in persuading his countrymen to follow this wild dream to emigrate en masse to Alaska, he was to have been rewarded with an administrative post there, an appointment as American Immigration Agent in Iceland or else an appointment to the American Secret Service.[1]

During the summer of 1874 Jón tried to stimulate interest in Milwaukee for the Alaska project, with the result that on August 2nd forty-three Milwaukee Icelanders signed a petition requesting the support of the President of the United States in promoting Icelandic emigration to Alaska. The President's response was to offer free transportation to Alaska on a United States naval vessel to a committee of three men, who could investigate the conditions of the soil there and report back to their fellow countrymen. The committee consisted of Jón Ólafsson, Paul Björnsson, the son of Jón's half-sister, and Ólafur Ólafsson from Espiholl.

In two letters to *Nordanfari*, dated October 14, 1874 and May 24, 1875, Paul Thorlaksson expressed his views on the Alaska venture. Paul goes into the subject in depth, approaching it from every angle. It is evident from his cogent analysis that he had studied the plan thoroughly. There is no passionate rhetoric, pro or con. He states his case in a cool, level-headed manner. The tone throughout is reasonable and fair. He comments:

> To give you some idea of what we Icelanders have been doing here in the west this summer, I can tell you that there has been more than a little activity directed towards finding a suitable site for establishing an Icelandic colony, but now I think the Icelanders have set their sights too far or sailed past their destination, for a month ago they began to look about for land in Alaska. . . . The explorers made the journey on their own account, but were given free transportation by train to San Francisco, thence by naval vessel north along the Pacific Coast.[2] It is my understanding that they intend to look around mainly along the coast and on the islands just north of the 54th parallel, and then return to Wisconsin. They are of the impression the government will probably provide free transportation for Icelanders, all the way from Iceland if they so desire, and that Icelanders will find this region on the shores of the Pacific Ocean entirely to their liking, since there is no intense heat nor, on account of the southerly ocean currents, does it become bitterly cold there. The last I heard of these compatriots of ours was that they had gone aboard ship at San Francisco on the 16th of last month to continue their journey north.

In his second letter, Paul continued:

> The travellers to Alaska, whom I mentioned briefly in my last letter, arrived there safe and sound and are very pleased with the terrain there, as they have indicated in letters to the newspapers at home, so there is no need for me to dwell on the features which to their minds make Alaska the best place for Icelanders to settle, provided they can obtain free transportation the entire distance.
>
> In my last letter I expressed the opinion that those who would establish an Icelandic colony on that remote uninhabited peninsula in the northwest were setting their sights too far. At that time I expected them to look around in the vicinity of the 54th parallel, but not farther north. They have, however, settled at a place called Kodiak Island, north of the 60th parallel, that is to say two degrees south of the latitude of Iceland. Ólafur Ólafsson and Paul Björnsson

> have homesteaded there, but Jón Ólafsson has returned and is presently in Washington, awaiting a decision on free transportation for Icelanders desirous of settling there. I received a letter from Jón today. In it he says he will probably be able to let me know within a few days what has been decided. Since I have previously mentioned this matter in a letter to you and think it will continue to occupy the attention of people at home, I feel obliged to discuss it further.
>
> At a meeting we Icelanders held in Milwaukee last summer this matter was brought to the floor and we devoted some time to discussing it. Several of us were opposed to it from the beginning, principally because of the distance involved. The utter remoteness of the place would render impossible all communication with the mother country and would nullify any potential benefit that might accrue to Iceland as a result of the departure of her sons and daughters to North America. To our minds this benefit derives from the Icelanders' association here with the people of the most progressive nation in the world as far as industry of every description is concerned, and the fact that they can learn here so many essential skills they had no opportunity to acquire at home. Now since we may be assured that the love children bear for their mother is not going to diminish simply because the children have come over here, there can be no doubt that they will visit their mother from time to time. It is also inevitable that they will leave with their mother some of the seed of the progress of this place—if I may be permitted so poetic an expression—a seed which will bear health-giving fruit for her.

He now turns his attention to the proposed "Alaska plan" of Jón Ólafsson.

> In other words, Iceland may expect just about the same of her children here as Norway, for instance, of hers. Norwegians are fully cognizant of the advantages that Norway has obtained through trade and communication with the United States, a natural consequence of Norwegian immigration. Now it is obvious that should Icelanders make the inordinately long journey to Alaska, they will be constrained to stay there, just as an individual who makes a perilous journey cannot return home again but must remain forever an exile from his native land.
>
> At this point people might counter with the statement that if men had free transportation to Alaska they would still have money in their pockets when they arrived and could, if they saw fit, return east to the United States or even all the way home. It seems to me, however, that returning from Alaska would not be quite the easy

matter that people who give it no more than passing attention are inclined to believe it to be.

In the first place, even though the United States Government might provide free transportation on naval vessels to people wanting to settle in Alaska, after spending so much to transport them there, the Government would hardly be inclined to furnish cheap passage to those who were unsatisfied and wanted to return.

In the second place, since westbound fares by both ship and rail are invariably cheaper than eastbound fares, travel from Alaska will naturally cost more than travel to that territory. For this reason as well as the distance involved, I think there can be no doubt that it would cost more to make the journey or move from Alaska to the United States than it would to come to the United States from Iceland. The one-way fare from Alaska to Iceland would cost more than the return fare from Iceland to the United States.

So far as the quality of the soil and opportunities for employment are concerned, I trust our three countrymen who have been to Alaska will make an accurate report to the newspapers at home so that those who might care to take advantage of free transportation (should it become available) may obtain a clear picture of what to expect upon their arrival in Alaska. There is no doubt that the Government will provide free transportation for those who want to exchange Iceland for Alaska, especially since the plan was conceived by a 'Yankee' in New York. I have no doubt he will support it with all the strength he can muster, but how he will benefit I shall not hazard to guess, for it would be wrong to attribute to him groundlessly an ulterior motive, even though he is of that nationality which, of all on earth, is said to be the most avid for money. . . . People here are so preoccupied with avaricious speculation inspired by 'Old Ned' that charity, which believeth all things and hopeth all things, has fallen on evil times.

The United States Secretary of the Navy recommended this plan last winter in the annual report he read to the Congress in Washington. His principal reason for supporting it was that Icelanders were outstanding seamen and that the United States could, in time, create a fleet along the Pacific Coast manned by sturdy Icelandic boys, should Alaska be settled from Iceland.

I shall not comment further on this matter at present. Before saying more I shall familiarize myself more fully with developments, but I think there already are many reasons to justify my disapproval.

If these few comments could serve to induce my fellow countrymen to look into this matter carefully and approach it with caution, you

> might print them in your paper. Although my reasons are, and most likely will remain, sufficient to deter me from Alaska, I do not deny that they may appear insignificant in the eyes of others. It can nevertheless be of some value to them to hear my reasons; at least it will do them no harm. In closing, so that no misunderstanding may arise over these lines and my purpose in writing them, I wish to state that it is far from my intention to impute to the three spokesmen for this enterprise any unsavoury plotting with American speculators to lead their countrymen west to this land of Indians. Quite the contrary, I am convinced that from their viewpoint they see themselves only in the role of benefactors, coming to the aid of their poverty-stricken kinsmen at home, who long to seek a better home for themselves but are too poor even to talk about it, a home where they could be independent and retain their identity, do the same kind of work they did at home and live under similar conditions.
>
> While this idea is attractive, it is questionable whether it would produce salutary results. It might prove detrimental to the future of the Icelandic people, not only those who might migrate to Alaska, but the main body of those at home as well. The branch would be cut off from all contact with the source. Those in Alaska would be all the more keenly aware of this, for there is little likelihood that they would ever become numerous enough to organize their own government. I consider it virtually certain, moreover, that if the Americans are seriously interested in having Alaska populated and agree to bear all the costs of transporting settlers there, they are not going to permit access to the wilderness only to Icelanders. They would welcome people from other northern countries as well, Finns, for instance, and Lapps. Then there would be more than one dove to circle around the ark and Ararat.
>
> Severed in that manner, the branch would be of no benefit whatever to the people at home.
>
> You can see that I do not assume employment opportunities and the sources of income to be more plentiful in Alaska than here in the United States, nor related in any way to the higher cost of transportation to Alaska. Were that the case, my objections and advice would fall on deaf ears, for who then would give up the idea of migrating there?

After spending all of three weeks in Alaska, Jón Ólafsson returned to San Francisco on the same naval vessel, the *U.S.S. Portsmouth,* then travelled by train to New York City, where he wrote a remarkable forty-eight-page brochure extolling the virtues of Alaska to Icelanders.

This brochure, published in 1875 by the United States Government Printing Office, is the first work printed in North America in the Icelandic language.[3]

It is remarkable for other reasons as well. After affirming the moral and intellectual superiority of the Scandinavian and Teutonic peoples over the "inferior nations" to the south of them, and citing examples of the conquest of southern civilizations by the northern nations, Jón avers that in the course of time the United States will be grateful for permitting their northernmost possession to be settled by the Icelandic people, who will then multiply and come to exert a beneficial influence on the "inferior peoples of mixed race" farther south![4]

He continues:

> If Icelanders settle in Alaska now, let us say ten thousand in fifteen years, and their number is doubled, for instance, every twenty-five years, which might well come to pass and no doubt would, in a land so ideally suitable for them, after three or four centuries there would be a hundred million of them, and they would then cover the continent from Hudson Bay to the Pacific Ocean. They could preserve their language, augment it quite easily from its inexhaustible store of roots and, who knows, as heirs to the great lands farther south, whether they might not extend its use little by little in this hemisphere until it came to replace that caricature of a language called English![5]

Referring to the availability of timber in Alaska, the Icelanders' renown for boat-building and navigation, and the developing market for American manufactured goods in the Orient, the writer suggests that in time the Icelanders in Alaska might well come to monopolize American shipping across the Pacific![6]

In an ardent but short-lived burst of enthusiasm over the terrain and topography of Kodiak Island, Ólafur Ólafsson and Paul Björnsson permitted Jón Ólafsson to submit over their names a report containing the following lines: "It is our conviction that Kodiak is better suited for Icelanders than any other land we know of on earth. . . . We would betray those who sent us, we would betray ourselves and we would be traitors to the truth if we affirmed anything other than we have."

One should pause here to compare the styles of Rev. Paul and Jón Ólafsson, the former gently reasoning, the latter cocksure and passionate. Rev. Paul writes ". . . to induce my fellow countrymen to look into this matter carefully," whereas Jón, convinced of the infallibility of his judgement, states ". . . we would be traitors to the truth if we affirmed anything other than we have."

Yet ironically, as the Icelandic historian Bergsteinn Jónsson has noted, in spite of all Jón Ólafsson's rhetoric, one winter at the trading post St. Paul, on Kodiak Island, Alaska, sufficed to chill the ardour of Ólafur Ólafsson and Paul Björnsson to spend any additional time there.[7]

In a letter Ólafur Ólafsson wrote from Kodiak on December 21, 1874 to Einar Bjarnason in Milwaukee, he maintained that the merchants at Kodiak were vehemently opposed to Icelanders or any other people settling in Alaska lest they encroach upon the trade monopoly enjoyed by the merchants there (no doubt a monopoly in skins and furs).[8]

Shortly afterward the Governor of Alaska, Mr. W. Elliot, a functionary of the Department of the Army, which was entrusted with administering the territory, wrote a letter to the editor of the Cleveland, Ohio *Herald.* In this letter, published early in January 1875, the Governor strongly advised against the colonization of Alaska. He deprecated the living conditions there, reporting that potatoes attained the size only of walnuts and that the previous summer the barley was fit only for fodder as it had to be cut while it was still green.[9]

Hjörtur Pálsson mentions a letter Paul Thorlaksson wrote to Jón Ólafsson on March 4, 1875, now in the possession of Hakon Bjarnason of Reykjavík.[10] In it Paul refers to an earlier letter of his to Jón, to which Jón had replied on February 27th.

Paul was convinced, Hjörtur Pálsson maintains, that the Alaska project could only benefit the three men who had journeyed there and the government which had subsidized the cost of that journey. He was concerned lest other Icelanders come to grief through blandishments, even without the lure of free transportation. Jón became indignant over the implication that he was an errand boy for the Americans. Paul, however, countered that Jón had travelled to Alaska not as a representative of his own people but at the instigation of Marston Niles and at the expense of the United States government. Paul also objected to the impression Jón had conveyed in the petition to President Grant that the signatures of forty-three Wisconsin Icelanders represented the unanimous desire of the Icelandic immigrants.[11]

Jón returned to Iceland with a trunkful of brochures, but they were poorly received there. In the meantime the United States Congress declined to appropriate funds to convey Icelanders to Alaska, and the episode was soon forgotten except by professional historians.

In his personal correspondence with Jón Ólafsson, Paul Thorlaksson did not mince words. In his letters to *Nordanfari,* on the other hand, he showed his sense of fair play, discussing only the pertinent issues and scrupulously refraining from impugning the motives of his opponents. Jón Ólafsson, however, appears to have become obsessed with the wish to discredit Paul and his father. To that end he did not hesitate to confuse unrelated issues.

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1. Hjörtur Pálsson, *Alaskaför Jóns Ólafssonar 1874,* facsimile of letter facing p. 112.

2. This was the frigate *U.S.S. Portsmouth,* a sailing vessel used as a training ship. The voyage from San Francisco to Cook's Inlet took twenty-four days.

3. Jón Ólafsson, *Alaska. Lýsing á landi og lands-kostum, ásamt skýrslu ínnar íslenzku sendinefndar,* p. 40 f.

4. *Ibid.,* p. 41.

5. *Ibid.,* p. 48.

6. *Ibid.,* p. 48.

7. Bergsteinn Jónsson, "Addragandi og uphaf vesturferda af Íslandi á nítjánda öld," *Andvari* (1975): 16.

8. Pálsson, *Alaskaför Jóns Ólafssonar,* p. 115.

9. Rögnvaldur Pétursson, "Landskodunarferdin til Alaska 1874," *Tímarit* VI (1934): 27.

10. Pálsson, *Alaskaför Jóns Ólafsonnar,* p. 114.

11. *Ibid.* Jón Ólafsson came to North America again in 1890. For a short time he was editor of the paper *Lögberg,* then of *Heimskringla.* He became active in the Unitarian movement in Winnipeg as well. To him, says Will Kristjanson *(The Icelandic People in Manitoba,* p. 285 f.), "belongs the credit for securing action [in the establishment of an annual Icelandic celebration—Islendingadagurinn]. Shortly after his arrival in Winnipeg in 1890 he contributed to *Lögberg* an article of considerable length, entitled 'Onward, Onward, Icelanders', in which he urged that a national celebration be held that summer, on August 2, the date of the Millennial celebration. . . . The committee . . . included the Rev. Jón Bjarnason, Einar Hjörleifsson, Jón Ólafsson, Eggert Jóhannsson, Gestur Pálsson, Sigtryggur Jónasson, and W.H. Paulson. . . . A successful celebration was held on August 2, 1890, in Victoria Gardens. The Icelandic community in Winnipeg then numbered some three thousand people, one-tenth of the entire population of the city, and it was a large procession that formed up on the grounds of the First Lutheran Church, at the corner of Ross and Nena Streets. Approximately forty carriages had been provided for the women and children. The parade, headed by the Infantry School band, started about 10 a.m., and travelled east on Ross Street; south on Isabel; east on Notre Dame Avenue and Portage Avenue; north on Main; east on Rupert Street and so to the park."

V

INVITING FRIENDS

AMONG THE PAPERS of the late Reverend Niels Steingrímur Thorlaksson, Paul's younger brother who for many years served the Icelandic Lutheran congregation at Selkirk, Manitoba, were two letters together with a portion of a third, written by Paul when a theological student in St. Louis, Missouri, to the Reverend Jón Bjarnason in Iceland. It is not definitely known how these letters came back into the possession of the Thorlaksson family, but the most likely explanation would appear to be that Jón Bjarnason's widow turned them over to Pastor Niels Steingrímur after her husband's death in 1914.

The letters have not previously been translated or published. They are the intimate communications of a warm-hearted, outgoing young man, gifted with a rare sense of humour and capable of laughing at himself, to a man whose friendship he esteemed and whose goodwill he thought he had no reason to doubt.

They also provide a deeper look into the psyche of Rev. Paul in the comments he directs to Lára, Jón's wife. His attentiveness to her is touching and reveals that she is a cherished, dear friend. The first letter closes: ". . . I remember what she whispered in my ear . . . after calling on both of you to say good-bye. . . ." Halfway through one letter he directs his words to her, and advises her in a fatherly way on items to bring to America, even those as personal as undergarments. Only a close friend could write so intimately.

Unfortunately, the two ministers who were now so close would one day drift very far apart.

The letters were, of course, written in Icelandic. Although the heading of the earliest letter is missing, a marginal notation, apparently made by Jón, indicates it was received by him in Reykjavík on March 20, 1873. In the present writer's translation it reads:

> There are now 90 ministers in the Norwegian Synod. Little by little their number is being augmented, thanks to ordinations here and the arrival of ordained men from Norway, but there is still a shortage of pastors. Many of the clergy have been suggesting I ought to try to induce a colleague to work with me here right from the beginning. I had told them there might perhaps be someone in Iceland who would be eager to come here and engage in missionary activity on behalf of the church. It occurred to me that you, for instance, might not be averse to it. At least I know your wife had no trepidation at the thought of leaving Iceland and coming here to live. . . . I touched on this matter briefly with Professor Schmidt (the professor who actually belongs to the Norwegian Synod), and he advised that before you (or my hypothetical friend) came here, you should send them your credentials (the original, of course, as well as copies in Latin).
>
> I therefore asked Schmidt, who recently attended a church meeting of some kind up in Milwaukee, to inquire of the bishop [or chairman] whether in his opinion I should encourage my friend to come. I know nothing more. I also mentioned to Schmidt that you would more than likely prefer to spend a year here at the school first, for I think it would be more advantageous for you to become familiar with the local situation before taking on the responsibilities of a pastor. Here they differ altogether from what we are accustomed to at home. . . . You would receive free board and lodging here at the school, but even if that were not the case, you could borrow enough to cover your needs. Here there is no risk attached to a loan of that type. One of the students who, God willing, is being graduated this spring is staying together with his wife in Professor Schmidt's home. She does some work for him and also helps Mrs. Schmidt to some extent with the housework. . . . All the students take their meals together in the basement of the school, and that is a mighty large company. The cost of meals for a period of ten months, the school term from September 1st to June 20th, is only $35, for the German congregations make a substantial contribution toward the expenses. . . . What I am about to write now, I should like you to consider in the nature of a suggestion. You know something of my character and I hope you have never found any trace of deviousness or insincerity. I have no desire to entice anyone to come here. I say

Reverend Jón Bjarnason, pioneer minister who served the Icelandic settlers in New Iceland. As a young man, Bjarnason and Reverend Paul were close friends. However, they later became rivals, mainly because of conflicting theological views. Photograph: Provincial Archives of Manitoba, New Iceland Collection, 469.

this in the firm conviction that were I in conversation with a man whose disposition was the same as my own, I could do no better than to say to him "Just come!" Each to his taste, however, and in such matters everyone must do as he sees fit. . . . Now if you should find within yourself a call or longing to come out here, your wisest course would be to send me immediately your credentials; in the event you subsequently changed your mind, I could always return them to you. . . . Forgive me, my dear Jón, for sending you so little news other than this suggestion. You know I have a thousand things to write you about.

My warmest greetings to your good wife. I remember what she whispered in my ear as I was leaving the elementary school after calling on the both of you to say goodbye; my suggestion is the fruit thereof. Give my cordial greetings to the Sveinbjörnsons and Gudjonsens as well; I shall never forget those families and the pleasant hours I have spent in their homes. I would also ask you to convey my regards to Thorvaldur Stephensson and his wife; I have promised to write both to them and to Mrs. Sveinbjörnsson. I do not want to renege on my promise, nor would my conscience permit me to do that. Therefore they may expect letters from me, God willing, although not by this post.

Please remember me to Helgason, Gísli Magnússon and my other acquaintances in Reykjavík.

I am thriving exceptionally well here on the banks of the Mississippi and were I a poet should compose a poem about "the father of waters," which flows past here, dark reddish-brown in colour, but I would not mention in it the railway engines which rumble up and down along the river banks, driven by steam and snorting like giants.

The largest steamboats ply up and down the river, and it has been bridged so that trains can pass without hindrance between the wheat-rich state of Illinois and tobacco-rich Missouri. Thus it is possible for sheep and other animals to survive the long trip south to the Gulf of Mexico.

Now in the event you have already accepted a call in Iceland you can stick this suggestion "under a chair," but should you think it feasible, you could obtain all the information you need from me before making any decision, information regarding financial assistance for the journey, your living arrangements at the school and the general situation here.

Forgive the burden of this letter then. Cordial New Year's greetings from your far away but sincere friend,

P. Thorlaksson

P.S. I am travelling the learned road and speak all languages! No want of boasting on my part.

All the best. Tell my Reykjavík relatives it would give me great pleasure to receive photographs of them.

The second letter bears the date May 10, 1873 and is from St. Louis:

Dear friend,

Please accept my heartfelt thanks for your candid letter of March 23rd. It was delivered to me on the 25th of last month along with your credentials, the first letter I have received from Iceland this spring. You can well imagine that I have had not a little to think about and do, mulling over in my mind all the news in letters and newspapers from the old country about events of which I had no knowledge for so long a time. I was totally unaware that so many of our countrymen, for instance, intended to come here next summer or, as they say here, this summer, and had no inkling of my parents' intention to settle here permanently. In the Lord's name, however, let them come! I would not try to hinder anyone from coming, for in my opinion that would be wrong. On the other hand, I would not specifically urge anyone, for it is not certain that my kind of porridge would be to everyone's taste, and it would not be at all pleasant to have disgruntled men casting clots of porridge at me. I shall, however, do my best to describe the porridge as accurately as possible, so people can make their own judgments. But enough along those lines.

I have been somewhat delayed getting on with your letter, but that is because I have been awaiting a letter from the chairman regarding your credentials in reply to one I wrote to him immediately upon receiving them.

The same evening I received your letter I called on Professor Schmidt, the Norwegian professor here at the school, and reported to him all the developments. He said there was nothing to prevent your being given financial assistance to enable you to spend a year here at the school, and remarked that your wife could lodge with him and Mrs. Schmidt, just as Mrs. Eidahl, the wife of a Candidate about to be graduated, is doing. You need not fear, he continued, that your circumstances here will not be reasonably comfortable, but on the other hand you should not expect to have the best of everything in all respects.

Ordinarily the council of the Norwegian Synod does not extend financial assistance to someone on the way here, only after he has actually arrived, but as you will see from the enclosed letter which I have just received (May 12th) from Preus, President of the council

Lára Mikaelina Gudjonsen, the gifted wife of Reverend Jón Bjarnason and warm friend of Reverend Paul Thorlaksson. Photograph: Provincial Archives of Manitoba, New Iceland Collection, 470.

and Synod, he is willing to assist you to come here, but naturally first needs to know how much you require before he sends you the money. He also wants to know whether you want it sent to you in Iceland or whether you can borrow money in Iceland and repay it from here. In the third place he naturally wants to know for certain that you have definitely made up your mind to come.

The worst inconvenience to contend with is the schedule of sailings of the mail ships to Iceland. I don't know whether this letter will be in time for the June sailing, but at any rate there is some time to spare, for you would not have to leave Reykjavík before September, even though the school term here begins on September first. The journey entails no serious complications. You will travel across England or else to Copenhagen, thence to New York and from New York west by rail. By that time I will be back here, so that you could send me a telegram when you were on your way and then I could meet you at the river and accompany you into the city.

You should bring with you as many books as you can, especially theological works and old Icelandic books, and then clothes, black suits in particular, as they are expensive here; I understand that women's clothing does not cost so much. You should have all this packed in two large chests.

The fare would be considerably less if you were not accompanied by your wife, for then I would sympathize with you for travelling second class, but the facts of the matter are twofold: you would not want to come without your wife, nor would I want to see you here without her, for woman is the ornament of man, you know, and since you looked forward to being adorned, it is not proper that you forsake your adornment. That is my "syllogismus," and I have become a great philosopher with regard to things American.

Second-class travel from England is by no means a hardship, but since first class is so much more comfortable I would recommend it for Lára's sake, even though the crossing is not unduly long. The difference in fare is substantial: first class from England to New York, for instance, is $80 or close to 15 pounds sterling, and the fare from Copenhagen is the same, while second class costs no more than $38. The first-class fare from New York to St. Louis is around $30. second class about $15, but insofar as comfort is concerned the difference in train travel is not so marked. You have velvet upholstered "sofas" in second class as well and, despite the distance, you are here within three days. Travel here is speedy, I would have you know.

What else have I to chatter about this time? Enough, to be sure, but time, which is money here, says "Stop, old fellow!"

You can send your next letter to 238 Milwaukee Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where it will reach me, God willing.

I don't yet know whether I shall be travelling to Europe this summer. The request from the prospective immigrants arrived so late. I have enough to do for us here and shall not lie down on the job. I have just sent off a letter to Lambertsen.[1] I wanted all the letters to arrive next month. I've had the presumption to write the account of my travels—have been working on it day and night, so to speak, and have sent it to my father. I've been so busy I cannot write as articulately as I would have wished, nor to as many people as I had wanted to. Trumpet my greetings to my acquaintances, relatives and friends, but first of all to your better half, to whom these lines are addressed as much as to yourself.

I look forward to exercising my tongue in Icelandic from time to time if you come here, but I really must loosen it up to make a speech in Old Norse on Norwegian Independence Day, the 17th of this month. Actually, I could talk all kinds of nonsense, for familiarity with that language is not one of the brethren's strong points. I shall speak rapidly and vehemently.

You will note that the bishop speaks of religious belief and makes it a condition of extending financial assistance to you that you agree with them in all doctrinal matters. For my part, I can declare that I have given the matter a great deal of thought and can only conclude that their teachings are strictly in the Lutheran tradition, free from all the fanaticism and rationalism that now seem to be uppermost in the minds of various peoples. If you have a longing to become acquainted with the essential Luther, then come here to see and listen to Professor Walther, a German. That is *etwas grossartig* ["something magnificent"].

If you have any love for the pope I shall not recommend that you come to Concordia. The same holds true for the Reformed churches and all the sects—the Methodists, Congregationalists, Anabaptists, Quakers, Mormons, etc. All those weeds sprout among the wheat in this broad America. As a pastor here you will earn your living by the strength of your intellect, not that of your hands.

May the Lord protect you! Your affectionate friend,

P. Thorlaksson

(Received at Reykjavík June 9, 1873)

The closing paragraphs of the above letter give a clear indication of Rev. Paul's beliefs: the Lutheran way is the right way, the "sects" have strayed and the Catholics are anathema. Rev. Paul's convictions were absolute, and his stand was absolute. If he can be called narrow-minded, he cannot be called wishy-washy! When he entered the strict Missouri Synod he encountered "the great German Lutheran preacher, Prof. C.F.W. Walther." Paul seems to have been partially mesmerized by this eloquent scholar, who no doubt played a major role in solidifying Paul's ideas of faith. Paul's article, printed in *Framfari* on February 12th, 1878, is especially revealing.

> Prof. C.F.W. Walther . . . must have few peers in the fervency and confidence of his faith at this time of spiritual lethargy. His defence and support of Luther's teachings are, to my mind, so completely in accord with the spirit of Luther, . . . that it seemed time and again as though it were Luther speaking when I was listening to Dr. Walther's sermons or lectures . . . especially when he was defending Lutheran doctrine from that of other churches. . . . Candidate H. Briem . . . withdrew on account of the narrow-mindedness of the teachers in spiritual matters. Opinions differ. I regarded the "narrow-mindedness"—if I may call it that—of my teachers as faithfulness to the word of God, which was to my benefit even though it was not my liking at first; I came to value and love it.

In view of Paul's firm convictions, it is not surprising that Rev. Paul and his good friend Rev. Jón Bjarnason later parted ways. The latter could not accept the absolutism propounded by the Synod. He was one who would be known today as a moderate theologian. One of Rev. Paul's nieces remembered an encounter with Rev. Jón during which he explained his faith in the following dramatic way. He suddenly raised both arms from his sides, stretching them out like the frame of a cross, and exclaimed, "*Jeg er svona breidur!*"[2]

The third letter is dated July 17, 1873 from 238 Milwaukee St., Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

> Dear Friend!
>
> My most heartfelt thanks for your letter of June 15th. The hope, even though uncertain, of seeing you here fills me with joy. In no way do I censure you in that respect; you are so careful and cautious a man, "magni consilii vir," if you will. As things stand with you, I know you have a great deal to take into consideration before leaving your country and setting out across the deep to this highly praised America.
>
> When you advise the bishop what you have in mind, in my opinion he will prefer to give you all the kingdoms of the world rather than let you slip out of his control to come here, for he is such an

anti-American. No, on second thought, he would not want to see the flock without a shepherd, even though the flock should wander over here.

As soon as I received your reply I wrote the chairman and mentioned in passing that you have been ordained. You mention your fear that you may be less acceptable to them on that account, but you can be ordained only once. I told him that if he thought it essential, you would have no objection to accepting a call immediately. I am convinced you are already capable of doing that—I have no doubts as to your knowledge of doctrine—but because of the languages, Norwegian and English—the latter not absolutely essential—I think it would be preferable for you to spend some time in St. Louis, even though it were only two or three months. This would also be a good idea in view of several particularities of the ministry here.

The liturgical practices of the Norwegians are very similar to our own. They have discontinued wearing the chasuble and surplice, but if you own a cassock and ruffled collar, for instance, you might well bring them with you. You are so right in saying the clergy here are dogmatic, but when you come here, where there are so many sects, you will understand the need for it. I can assure you you will not find a better place to put all your theology to use. There is something solid in this highly praised country, I will have you know, and I think it safe to say that in time it will be reflected in every aspect of life here.

While I think of it, I should like to ask you, whether you come or not, to be kind enough to send me a short summary of the history of the Church in Iceland, the number of clergy now in the country and the situation of the Church in general, for Professor Walther recently asked me to write an article for a German periodical published by the professors here at Concordia, and I promised that if you came, I would let him have it in the autumn.[3] At the moment I can't recall anything else I wanted you to do for me, and although I have nothing more to report to you, I should like to address a few words to your wife.

My good Lára! You would like answers to a few questions, so I shall let you have my opinions on them.

With regard to personal effects, in addition to underwear and outer clothing, there is nothing to prevent your bringing with you small items, unbreakable tableware for instance, which are easily transported, but could be sold here for more than it would cost to replace them locally after you arrived. There is no need to bring carpeting, a spinning wheel or carding comb; all that and more besides is to be had here, and besides, those items are troublesome to pack.

You'll find it best to wear cotton next to your skin in summer or cotton and then wool in winter. Linen undergarments are not good when one is perspiring profusely, we know from experience. They do not absorb the sweat, or more properly speaking, become soaked at once. That's logical, isn't it?

Well then, enough of that. I think you should bring your *skautbúningur* ["festive attire"] with you. Actually, I don't imagine you will have occasion to wear it right away, while your husband is serving a Norwegian congregation, except to show it off as a "curiosity," but perhaps later on, when you have an Icelandic congregation, the church members will enjoy seeing their pastor's wife clad in the traditional Icelandic manner.

Wearing the tasseled cap here serves only to attract attention to oneself, but people here naturally follow their own inclinations in that respect. I think, however, that Icelandic women here will not be wearing *peisuföt* ["everyday wear, made of homespun"] much longer. It gets too warm here for that. I can imagine you saying, What are married couples coming to? But after all, why not? Just think! Otherwise we wouldn't be Lutherans.

There is certainly nothing to stand in the way of your bringing your serving girl, if your finances permit. I have come to the end of the page. May God be with you both and may He decide whether your path is to lead here or elsewhere. "All that He wrought is good."

Your affectionate friend,
P. Thorlaksson

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1. Agent for the Allan Line at Reykjavík.

2. The niece was Louisa Gudfinna (Thorlaksson) Gislason, a daughter of Jón Thorlaksson, Rev. Paul's younger brother. Louisa lived most of her life at Brown, Manitoba, and was a driving force and a leader in the Icelandic community for fifty-odd years. Roughly translated, Rev. Jón's words are, "My faith is this broad," or, literally, "I am so wide."

3. A search of the Archives of the Concordia Historical Institute of St. Louis, Missouri has failed to disclose any record of an essay by Paul Thorlaksson printed in one of the Seminary or Synod publications.

VI

DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCES EMERGE

THE MOST SEVERE of Paul's critics could hardly accuse him of having misrepresented either the position of the Norwegian Synod or that of the faculty at Concordia Seminary to his friend Jón Bjarnason.

Although Jón's replies to Paul's letters are not available, in January and May of 1874 he wrote from Decorah, Iowa to Helgi Hálfdanarson, one of his former teachers at the theological seminary in Reykjavík. These letters, included in a collection of Jón's essays and lectures,[1] are interesting for the light they cast on the origins of the conflict that subsequently developed between Jón and Paul.

Jón and Lára left Iceland on September 5, 1873 and sailed from Glasgow on the *S.S. Corinthian,* which arrived at Quebec City on September 27th. On their way west they visited friends in Milwaukee, but appear not to have sent a telegram to Paul, as he had suggested, to advise him of the time of their arrival at St. Louis so he could meet them. They arrived there unannounced late in the evening of October 5th and checked into a German hotel where, Jón complained, they were roundly cheated. His biographer, the late Reverend Rúnólfur Marteinsson, related that Jón described the hotel as "a den of thieves as well as a pigsty."[2] They got in touch with Paul the following morning.

Despite Jón's hesitation to commit himself to a definite course of action and Paul's uncertainty as late as July 17th of his friends' plans, Jón was nevertheless disappointed that arrangements for his reception had not been arranged down to the last detail. The following letter, written to Helgi Hálfdanarson, describes some of Jón's impressions.

> Paul arranged for us to stay at first with the wife of one of the teachers

there at the school. The same teacher, Paul had written me, was familiar with our case, but was now in Europe: in Norway and Germany representing the interests of this so-called 'Norwegian Lutheran Synod', with which I have become embroiled. . . . This teacher [Professor Schmidt[3]], whose guests we are, or rather whose wife's guests we are, taught at the school here at Decorah until last year; he is a German, but for a long time now has been 'Norwegianized'. When we arrived Paul did not know for certain what was to become of us: whether we were to continue to stay on in Schmidt's home or go elsewhere. He therefore wrote to the President of the Norwegian Synod, a man named Preus,[4] but as is often the case, he was away on an official visit of inspection, so no reply was forthcoming. Then he wrote to a pastor here in Decorah, named Koren,[5] who, he had heard, was supposed to have something to do with me. An inordinate time passed before there was a reply from him for this cleric was also away on a journey. He did, however, finally write that my wife and I should come to see him. We set out from St. Louis the evening of November 2nd. It was recommended to us that instead of going by rail we take a steamboat up the Mississippi, and people (to be precise, the Norwegian students at the school) were of the opinion that such a journey would take no longer than three days. Things worked out differently, however, for we did not arrive until the 13th of November. This time-consuming journey was partially a consequence of the boat on which we were travelling breaking down, so it had to turn back. The passengers had to wait several days for the next boat. Then too, the river had become shallow due to a long-continued drought. We had no cause, however, to complain of discomfort on this voyage as was the case on the Atlantic crossing. Here everything was so elegant and luxurious that it exceeded all expectations. We were nevertheless happy to see the journey come to an end. The minister, Koren, gave us an exceptionally cordial welcome and has since had us to dinner at his home, found us comfortable lodgings in the vicinity and provided us with everything we need, firewood for instance, and provisions for our breakfast and supper. In that respect we are well satisfied, for he has taken great pains to make sure we lack nothing that we need. A few days after our arrival Koren and three other ordained members of the synod [i.e. the president of the school and two members of the faculty] had a so-called 'colloquium' or discussion with me on doctrine, drawn up by themselves for the purpose of determining whether the views held by the participant differ from their own. This colloquium was extremely formal and superficial. They brought up a few matters of doctrine, for the most part those on which they differ from the other Lutheran

> church bodies here in America. They seemed to think that I agreed with them in all essential particulars.
>
> Shortly afterwards, however, Koren seemed to think that I was not sufficiently pure in my faith and time and again had discussions with me on that subject. I soon discovered him to be more narrow-minded, bigoted and even more fanatic in doctrinal matters than any man I have encountered before, and I have also observed that his views are, generally speaking, those held by the entire synod. Thus he and the synod in general hold that nothing is good and valid, but everything to be condemned and cursed that is not entirely in accordance with the words of Luther and the strictest Lutherans after his day. . . . That Luther was 'infallibilis' they do not maintain in words, but it is obvious that they fervently believe it and guide themselves accordingly. . . . They firmly believe the pope to be antichrist because it is so stated in some of the Lutheran confessions of faith and because Luther maintained such to be the case. Hence in one of their liturgical prayers there is a petition imploring God to tread under foot the pope of Rome and so on, which I consider blasphemy and religious hypocrisy, whatever Luther may have said in his time. They likewise hold to the age-old orthodox theory of inspiration of the Scriptures, namely that every word was literally written by the Holy Spirit, just as I am now writing this letter; that the Scriptures in their entirety are clear and understandable, and furthermore that every word must be interpreted literally. As a consequence of this last proposition they consider natural science and astronomy to be ungodly subjects, for according to their views they contradict the letter of the Bible. This is what is maintained here in the Synod and at least I gathered from Paul Thorlaksson last autumn that he was of the opinion that the sun revolved around the earth.

It appears that Jón entered into the interview with a "liberal" mind but hardly an open one. At the interview he "played his cards close to the vest" and did not risk bringing out any unorthodox or conflicting views. At any rate it seems he found no redeeming feature in their teachings at all, and silently preferred to dismiss them in total.

Jón refers contemptuously to Professor Walther as "the most important man of their [i.e. the Missouri] synod, to whose tune everyone dances both here [i.e. in Decorah] and there [in St. Louis]."[6] In his view none of the Norwegian clergy have any learning whatever, "unless it can be called learning that they know by heart all the dogmatic rules they have assembled from the oldest Lutheran writings, which have become the limit one may not exceed." He goes on to discuss a sermon preached by the Reverend Lauritz Larsen,[7] President of Luther College at Decorah, on the obedience children owe their parents:

> He mentioned that it is stated in the Proverbs of Solomon that the eagles and ravens shall pluck out the eyes of the man who disobeys his parents. He explained that because of God's patience toward mankind, His threats are not always fulfilled, but once in a while people have concrete instances of them. Thus it came to pass not long ago here in America that a man called on his pastor, whom he characterized as an orthodox believer, and by that I assume he must have belonged to the Norwegian Synod (for in their view it is the only one whose teachings are correct, true and perfect), and asked to be united in marriage with his sweetheart, a poor girl. The pastor inquired whether he had the approval of his parents. The man replied in the negative, explaining that his father considered the girl too poor for him. "Then I will not unite you in matrimony," said the pastor, "at least not before I have spoken with your father and endeavoured to obtain his consent." The man was not satisfied with that arrangement, so he went to another minister (whom Larsen referred to as a sectarian preacher) and was married by him. On the way home he marched triumphantly past the dwelling of his own pastor. But then this man met with his death by drowning in some river or other. After a long search his body was finally found, snagged around the trunk of an oak tree. A raven was plucking out the eyes of the corpse. This, Larsen claimed, was clearly the revenge of the Lord and a literal fulfillment of the warning words in the Book of Proverbs!

Jón relates that in December Koren had requested him to prepare several sample sermons. These apparently met with Koren's approval, for he then asked Jón to prepare a sermon for public delivery, but to show it first to Larsen. But both Larsen and Koren said the public sermon contained so many doctrinal errors that he would not be permitted to deliver it.

At this point Rev. Jón appears to have become totally exasperated with his mentors. Later in the same letter he confesses to have been "in such great difficulties while the antagonism of the clerics towards me was at its height last winter. . . ." No doubt he had begun to protest more and more blatantly his disapproval of their "narrow-mindedness," and no doubt this aroused a rising tide of resentment against him.

Larsen and Koren then concluded that it was futile to attempt to persuade Jón to their point of view. They offered him, instead, a position teaching Latin on an hourly basis. Pleased with his work, they then offered him the position on a full-time basis, Jón reported to Helgi, but he decided to retain it only for the next year.

> If enough of our countrymen come here so that a minister could make a living serving them, I shall most likely take that responsibility in hand, but if that does not come to pass I shall probably leave here just the same, for I determined some time ago that I would never be a minister in this synod, even though they modified their position to some extent. It is my firm conviction that Icelanders coming here should refrain from joining it. Paul Thorlaksson's view on this subject is entirely different from mine, for he is so thoroughly delighted with the Norwegian clerics' exaggerated emphasis on literal interpretation, which was characteristic of early Lutheranism. We have been arguing over this all winter by mail, but the result will doubtless be that each of us holds on to his own view. He now has so much confidence in these spiritual leaders of the synod that I think it will be impossible to shake his firm conviction. With the exception of Paul's closest relatives, all the other Icelanders here in the west who give any thought to the matter avoid the synod men as much as possible, and now things have gone so far that they have appointed two men to try to find a suitable site to establish a colony west of here. I hope therefore that an Icelandic colony will soon become a reality. In my view it is a precondition for the survival of our people in almost every respect. The two men charged with this responsibility have uppermost in mind a site in western Iowa or else in Nebraska, where, to some extent at least, there is land suitable for sheep-raising.
>
> I owe you my heartiest thanks for the theological information you were kind enough to send me. I found myself in such great difficulties while the antagonism of the clerics towards me was at its height last winter, particularly because I was without books. In their hearts these obscurantists reject all scholarly theological views, even though they dare not publicly acknowledge that fact in so many words.
>
> Otherwise I don't give two shillings for their understanding of theology, for apart from its narrowness it is also shallow. I have become bored to death listening to sermons as dull and in such poor taste as theirs. It is my firm conviction, moreover, that they keep the general public in ignorance as a matter of principle. It may also be true that they do this in 'bona fide'. Their position is not justifiable

on that account, however, and I feel that sometime they may come to recognize their fanaticism for what it is and learn better 'mores'. The second most prominent Norwegian synod here in America, which comprises Danish ministers as well, is the so-called Conference, which last winter waged a merciless battle against this synod on doctrinal matters. In one of their publications the Conference men state that in their view the synod is popish, hieratic, universalist, etc., to the shame and disgrace of the Lutheran Church and the Norwegian people. The author of the article is a Norwegian theologian, a teacher at the school operated by the Conference at Minneapolis, a man named Oftedal, who came from Norway last autumn. There is much along those lines, bitter though it is, to which I could subscribe.

Many articles about Iceland and the thousand years of settlement have appeared in the newspapers in the eastern states this past winter, with mention as well of the early Icelandic discovery of America. Certain scholars there in the east have also been diligently collecting all types of American literature to send to Iceland this summer as a token of their spiritual participation in the jubilee at home. Even the Norwegian Synod has expressed its intention of sending—on the urging of these men—a collection of their religious writings home to Iceland. The Icelanders will then be able to see what this group of clerics is really like at heart.

Jón Ólafsson is doing well here and has written a little about Iceland for one of the Norwegian papers. . . .

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1. Jón Bjarnason, *Rit og Raedur,* pp. 279-294.

2. Rúnólfur Marteinsson, *Aevisaga séra Jóns Bjarnasonar,* p. 20.

3. This was the learned Rev. Friedrich August Schmidt (1837-1928), B.A., Concordia College, Altenburg, Mo., 1854; Cand. Theol., Concordia Seminary, 1857; Lutheran Pastor, Eden. N.Y., 1857-1859, Baltimore, Md., 1859-1861; Professor at Luther College, 1861-Jan. 1, 1872: Greek, Latin, German, English, Mathematics, Penmanship, Geography, Religion, Singing, U.S. History and Logic. Schmidt was also a copious writer and editor of several journals.

4. The Rev. Herman Amberg Preus (1825-1894) was President of the Norwegian Synod from 1862 until 1894. His son, Christian Keyser Preus (1852-1921), was elected President of Luther College in 1902 and continued in that post until his death. Jacob Aall Ottesen Preus (1883-1961), a son of C.K. Preus, was Governor of the State of Minnesota, 1921 to 1925. See *Luther College Through Sixty Years, 1861-1921*, pp. 73-80.

5. Ulrik Vilhelm Koren (1826-1910) was born in Bergen, Norway. B.A., Bergen Cathedral School, 1844; Cand. Theol., Univ. of Christiania, 1852 (also M.A.); Teacher, Nissen Latin School, Christiania, 1852-1853.

The late Professor Knut Gjerset (B.A., University of Minnesota, 1893; Student, John Hopkins University, 1895-1896, Heidelberg University, 1896-1898; Ph.D., Heidelberg, 1898), who was long associated with Dr. Koren at Luther College, portrayed him in the following terms: "No one exercised a more active influence in providing means and equipment for the new school [i.e. Luther College] than the Rev. V. Koren, the most astute and brilliant of the men who guided the Norwegian Lutheran Synod during the early years. In the many struggles for orthodox Lutheran doctrine waged in those times, no one quite equalled him in thorough scholarship, critical discernment, dialectic skill, or resourceful leadership. A deep religious interest had moved him to turn his steps from elegant home surroundings in Norway. After graduating from the University of Christiania he left influential friends and assured distinction to cast his lot with emigrants in a pioneer wilderness. But even in these rustic surroundings courtly elegance and refinement of manners never forsook him. His devout religious character was of an enlightened and intellectual type. He frowned upon emotionalism, but clung with unswerving fidelity to the doctrine of verbal inspiration of the Bible. . . . But although he was found in the forefront of every battle where purity of doctrine was at stake, he loved peace, and counted it his chief mission to do a pastor's work of preaching the Gospel to his congregations. He hated all sham as thoroughly as he loved all true culture." (*Luther College,* op cit., p. 383 f.)

In view of the Rev. Jón Bjarnason's aspersions on Dr. Koren, it is of more than passing interest to note that at the dedication of the Koren Library at Luther College in 1921, it was mentioned in the dedicatory address that the library was so named because "of all the pioneers [Dr. Koren] was the one who was most of all interested in books and good literature." (*Luther College,* op cit., p. 400.)

6. Paul Thorlaksson gave the lie to this unfair accusation in *Framfari,* I, 11, February 12, 1878.

7. Peter Laurentius (Laur.) Larsen (1833-1915); B.A., Christiansand Cathedral School, Norway, 1850; Cand. Theol., Univ. of Christiania (Oslo), 1855; Teacher of languages.

It is difficult to reconcile Jón Bjarnason's appraisal of Dr. Larsen's mentality with the influence Dr. Larsen actually brought to bear on education and scholarship as well as positive contributions to the advancement of religion within his own family. From his first marriage in 1855 with Karen Radine Neuberg, who died in 1871, there were four children: "Thora, wife of Dr. J.W. Magelsen, died 1908; Marie, died as missionary in South Africa, 1899; Henrietta, wife of the Rev. K. Xavier, died 1904; and Herman (Luther College 1899), physician, died 1895. From the second marriage, with Ingeborg Astrup in 1872, there were eight children [all of whom were living in 1921]: Hannah, editor *American-Scandinavian Review,* New York City; Nicolai Astrup, L.C. 1896, missionary to China; Karen, A.M., teacher, St. Olav College; Ingeborg, position in library, St. Olav College, Northfield, Minnesota; Lauritz, L.C. 1902, D.D., S.T.D., Ll.D., President National Lutheran Council, New York City; Signe, Mrs. Clifford Elder, Atchison, Kansas; Jakob, L.C. 1908, Rhodes Scholar, Oxford, 1911-1914 (M.A. 1920), Asst. Professor, State University of Washington; and Henning, L.C. 1908, Ph.D., Princeton, Asst. Professor, State University of Iowa." (*Luther College,* op cit., p. 67.)

VII

CONFLICT AND CELEBRATION

BECAUSE OF Thorlákur Gunnar Jónsson's role in organizing the 1873 migration from Iceland to Wisconsin, and Paul Thorlaksson's role in providing accommodation and winter jobs for the immigrants on Norwegian farms, the more responsible beneficiaries of their concern came to trust the advice of these two leaders on most matters of community welfare. Others, however, appear to have resented the growing influence of Paul and his father, and began campaigns against them.

In an unpublished scholarly paper submitted to the Department of History, University of Iceland in September 1971,[1] Atli Hrafn Kristinsson examined the correspondence between Thorlákur Gunnar Jónsson and Tryggvi Gunnarsson, who, as representative of the Gránufélag (the co-operative society in Iceland), was entrusted with the sale of livestock belonging to the 1873 emigrants. In the autumn of 1873 Tryggvi and his wife left Iceland to take up residence in Copenhagen. He encountered frustrating delays and difficulties in collecting payment for the livestock which had been sold to Scottish buyers. These difficulties were not fully understood in Wisconsin, however, and some people began to blame Thorlákur for the lack of payment for the livestock they had turned over to the Gránufélag before leaving Iceland. To complicate matters further, many refused to believe they were still indebted to Thorlákur for the payment of their passage to America.

From Jón Bjarnason's letter to Helgi Hálfdanarson, cited in the previous chapter, it appears that Jón did not fully reciprocate Paul Thorlaksson's esteem for him. He makes no mention of appreciation of Paul's efforts on his behalf, and there is more than a hint of contempt in the insinuation that Paul and the Synod clergy believed the sun to revolve around the earth. Paul subsequently ridiculed the accusation in a letter to the newspaper *Framfari.*[2] Jón Ólafsson, still smarting from the failure of his Alaska dream and from Paul's opposition to it, joined the list of those aligned against Paul and Thorlákur.

In two letters to Jón Bjarnason in the spring of 1874, Ólafsson alleged that the Norwegian Synod was attempting to "buy" Icelanders into its congregations. He called Paul and Thorlákur nothing more than "subservient thralls of the synod," and accused them of having exploited the Icelandic immigrants to provide free labour for Norwegian farmers and of having cheated the people injured in the railway accident on the way to Milwaukee the previous summer "out of hundreds of dollars."[3] Once again, this fiery writer was showing a blatant disregard for the truth.

However, it appears the majority of the Icelandic colonists kept their faith in Paul and his father Thorlákur. In the spring of 1874 a small group of Icelanders who had gained some experience working over the winter on Norwegian farms approached Thorlákur with the suggestion that he and Paul try to find a tract where they could obtain land for themselves, even though there were neighbours of other nationalities. They had no desire to impose on the Norwegians who had been so kind to them, nor did they want to subject their families to a precarious existence in Milwaukee, where unemployment had become an acute problem.

This situation differed greatly from when Paul had declined to purchase or take options on land for prospective immigrants. These men, fully cognizant of the realities of life in America, were not asking him to make decisions which would be binding on them, but to investigate possibilities.

As was to be expected under the circumstances, Paul made inquiries among the German and Norwegian clergy, whose flocks had prospered in America. They directed his attention to Shawano County in northeastern Wisconsin. The best land there had already been taken up by Norwegian farmers; the rest was of only marginal quality and the size of individual holdings was extremely limited. These drawbacks were not, however, concealed from the prospective settlers.

In a letter of October 14, 1874 to the editor of *Nordanfari,* Paul

Thorlaksson explained that "Shawano" was an Indian word meaning bright or sparkling water. He continued:

> Much of the terrain there is wooded, with lakes and small streams here and there. The largest body of water is Lake Shawano, which has a surface area of some 20 to 30 square English miles. A few weeks ago about 10 or 12 of our compatriots acquired land a short distance east of this lake, not far from the road northwest of Green Bay. They intend to cut timber this winter in the vicinity of their homes. Since obtaining land for themselves, 80 acres each, they have been busy felling timber and building their cabins. They haven't far to go for wood for that purpose! . . . I was there in August for a meeting of the county committee, attended by the reeves of all the townships. With the co-operation of a Norwegian, Pastor Homme, and a German, Pastor Dicke, both of whom are energetic and helpful Lutheran ministers in northern Wisconsin, we persuaded the committee to sell all the county land in Shawano to the Icelandic colonists for half its assessed value.
>
> With the stipulation that no individual be permitted to acquire more than 80 acres, the committee agreed to sell the land for one tenth down, the balance to be paid within ten years at 7% interest. Now since only a small portion of this undeveloped land will be appraised at more than one dollar an acre, with the price reduced to half, 80 acres will cost only $40.00: $4.00 down with $36.00 to be paid within ten years, and that is virtually a gift. . . . The committee also decided to let the Icelanders have free the sandy tract north of Lake Shawano and, generally speaking, all the sandy land in the county that is unsuitable for growing wheat. It could, on the other hand, provide pasturage for sheep, and they understand Icelanders have had a great deal of experience with those animals.

In view of the actual circumstances, Jón Ólafsson's complaint to Jón Bjarnason that Paul Thorlaksson intended "to poke the Icelanders into some remote backwater of the Norwegian Synod" can only be seen as another attempt to discredit him.

Although the rebel Jón Ólafsson had shown earlier that he possessed an oversized ego and an undersized bit of common sense in his drive for "Icelandic supremacy" in the Alaska settlement scheme, he must be given credit for some products of his imagination. Early in 1874 he conceived the idea of the first Icelandic celebrations in America.

With his usual enthusiasm he wrote to Jón Bjarnason suggesting that the Icelanders in Wisconsin celebrate along with the people at home on Sunday, August 2, 1874. That date was the millennial of the settlement of Iceland. Plans for the celebration had been given worldwide publicity and included a state visit from the King of Denmark as well as the granting of a constitution to Iceland. In June of that year Ólafsson urged Jón Bjarnason to return to Milwaukee from teaching at Decorah, Iowa as soon as possible, as Paul Thorlaksson was expected home any day from St. Louis. Ólafsson seems to have been under the impression that Jón Bjarnason's presence would forestall Paul's serving on the planning committee, but in this hope he was frustrated. The committee was composed of himself, Jón Bjarnason and Paul Thorlaksson.[4]

The celebration of Iceland's thousand years of settlement, held in Milwaukee on Sunday, August 2, 1874, began at two o'clock in the afternoon with a service of thanksgiving. It was the first church service in the Icelandic language conducted on the American continent.

The church was a small frame edifice, the home of Our Savior's Lutheran congregation. The pastor of the church was the Reverend S.T. Geelmuyden, a friend of Paul Thorlaksson's who was affiliated with the Norwegian Synod. Ironically, it was Pastor Geelmuyden who had been the butt of Jón Ólafsson's ridicule and contempt in his story to Jón Bjarnason about a "Norwegian pastor" who recognized words of "pure Hebrew" in the ravings of a demented girl who had never heard a word of that language.[5]

The service was conducted by Rev. Jón Bjarnason, at that time the only ordained Icelandic minister in North America. He preached an exalted sermon on the text prescribed for services held throughout Iceland that day, Verses 1-4 of the 90th Psalm:

> Lord, thou has been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God. Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men. For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.

Jón Bjarnason's talented wife Lára led the congregation in the singing of familiar Icelandic hymns and it is reported that both she and Hans Thorgrimsen (then a theological student), who also had a fine voice, sang solos. In addition to some sixty to seventy Icelanders, a number of Norwegians also attended the service.

After the service, the Icelanders marched to a park in the suburbs of Milwaukee. The procession was led by two men garbed to represent characters from the saga period. One of them bore an Icelandic standard, a white falcon embroidered on a blue field; the other carried the Stars and Stripes. Marching behind them, two by two, in their American Sunday best, were the men, followed by the women, many of whom wore traditional Icelandic dress. Some were clad in *peisuföt,* the workaday garb of dark homespun, enlivened by a bright scarf, plaid apron and a tasseled velvet cap. Others, including Lára Bjarnason, wore the gala costumes they had brought from the old country, stately creations of brocade and velvet, adorned with belts fastened with elaborate silver buckles which were family heirlooms, with coifs of lawn and fine lace.

Close to the speakers' platform in the park an enterprising Swede had set up a refreshment stand to sell cold alcoholic beverages, including the excellent beer for which Milwaukee was renowned, indispensible for the drinking of toasts. Jón Bjarnason served as master of ceremonies.

Although the occasion appeared to be marked by the goodwill of all participants, the tensions and preoccupations of some of the speakers were poorly concealed.

The first speaker was Jón Ólafsson. In an address described as "lengthy but cogent," he referred to the political struggle in Iceland and asserted that even though the country was being granted a constitution, the struggle for independence from Denmark was far from over and would have to be renewed with increased intensity. At the close of his emotional address he proposed a toast to the homeland.

Ólafur Ólafsson from Espiholl then proposed a toast to the immigrants from Iceland, those who had already arrived and those still to come, and exhorted his listeners not to let differences of opinion on minor matters divert them from maintaining a solid front on issues of major importance.

Ólafur was followed by Paul Thorlaksson who, as a courtesy to the Norwegians present, spoke in their language. He proposed a toast to the Norwegians in America and thanked them for their generous help to the Icelanders who had arrived the year before. He acknowledged the substantial benefit Icelanders gained in learning from the Norwegian farmers, and expressed the hope that the two kindred peoples would continue the close relationship they had hitherto enjoyed in Wisconsin. Pastor Geelmuyden responded to Paul's toast, thanked him on behalf of the Norwegians and bade the Icelanders a cordial welcome to America.

Then Jón Bjarnason spoke. He urged his listeners to eschew the example set by the Norwegians in America who, he said, had allowed their mother-tongue to degenerate into a hodge-podge of Norwegian and English, containing a substantial element of American idioms. He also had harsh words for those Norwegians who had Anglicized their names or adopted new ones in the expectation of passing themselves off as native Americans.

The speeches, which had been interspersed with Icelandic songs led by Frú Lára, ended, however, on a more conciliatory note. Jón Ólafsson proposed a toast to two distinguished American friends of Iceland who had been invited to the celebration in Milwaukee but were unable to attend. These were Professors Daniel Willard Fiske of Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y., and Rasmus B. Anderson of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, both of whom had successfully carried out a plan to assemble a large collection of American books and present them as a millennial gift to the National Library of Iceland.[6]

Both Paul Thorlaksson and Jón Bjarnason sent accounts of the Milwaukee festivities to papers in Iceland. Paul's account was printed in the January 12, 1875 issue of *Nordanfari*. Jón sent his account to his friend the Reverend Matthias Jochumsson, who at that time was editor of the Reykjavík weekly paper *Thjodolfur*. It was published there in two instalments, November 28, 1874 and February 15, 1875.

After the Icelandic festival was over and arrangements had been made to buy land in Shawano County, Paul returned to St. Louis for his third and final year at Concordia Seminary.

Other than mentioning in his letters to Jón Bjarnason his unbounded admiration for Dr. Walther, his enthusiasm for the conservative theology taught at Concordia, and the fact that the students took all their meals together in a large room in the basement, Paul left no account of his mode of life, activities or special interests there.

The late Theodore Buenger, D.D. of St. Paul, Minnesota, who graduated in 1882, recalled a few features of student life in the old building in use during Paul's years at Concordia:

> For a part of my time I lived in the *Durchgangszimmer*, through

> which the students who were living in the south wing passed when they went to their classroom. One corner of the room was screened off with a 'Spanish wall' made of old mattress-covering. We were really extravagant in the use of kerosene oil on our mattresses as antidote against a little animal called cimex. The old building was heated by stoves, which we tended ourselves, carrying the Illinois soft coal from the coal-house (the outhouse, barn, and bakery were under the same hospitable roof with it) to the Seminary and then hoisting the buckets up to the second or third floor on derricks, which were the porch ornaments.
>
> Athletics? Hardly any. Some would play a little catch on the lawn in front or in the rear of the building. Constitutionals along Jefferson Avenue to Benton Park or to the river bluffs . . . to take a sun-bath on the peak or a swim in the Mississippi at its foot.[7]

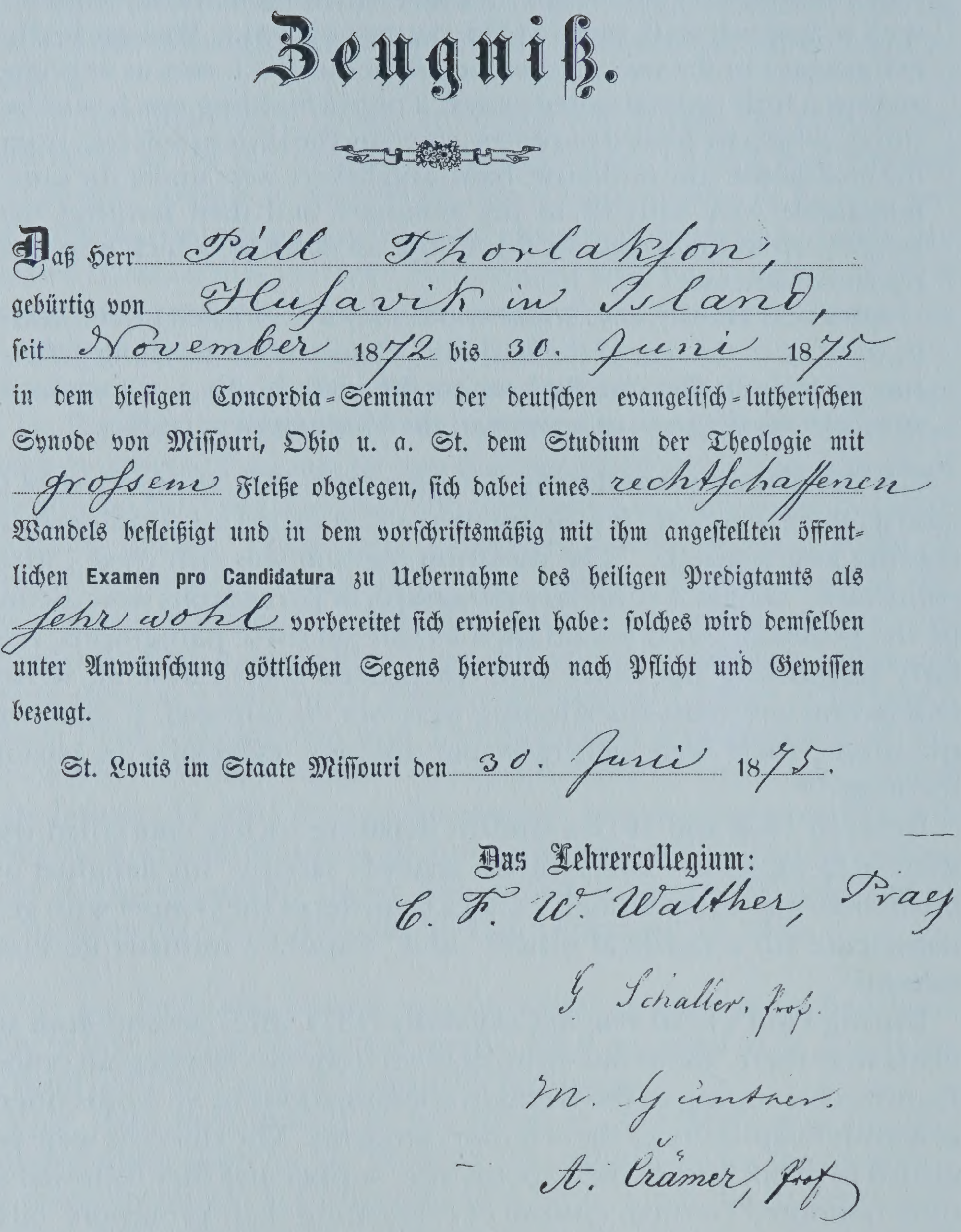
C.S. Meyer notes that during the years 1861-1875, irrespective of the course, there were very few assignments that called for supplementary reading and research. "The dictation method was still used," Meyer continues, "that is, a summary paragraph or paragraphs were dictated by the professor, who would then lecture on these paragraphs, regularly supporting his views with quotations from Lutheran writers. Discussion and cross-questioning were not encouraged. If there were questions, there were generally pat answers, especially in pastoral theology."[8]

Between 1868 and 1873 a student debating society concerned itself with such topics as "Did Jepthah actually sacrifice his daughter as a burnt offering on the altar?", "Can a minister of the Gospel with good conscience fill a political office?" and "Should a minister go into a saloon?"

During Paul's final year at Concordia (1874-1875), seventy-four students were there, about one-third of them from two Norwegian synods. Families belonging to the German congregations in St. Louis offered generous hospitality to the seminary students. The students were permitted to drink beer in their rooms after supper and they followed the time-honoured German custom of celebrating their professors' birthdays with kegs of beer.

Lectures were in both Latin and German. Dr. Buenger, who was a nephew of Dr. Walther, recalled that his uncle used Latin for his quizzes but gave his explanations in German.

To some of his fellow Lutherans, Dr. Walther was a guardian and champion of the purity of Lutheran doctrine. To others he was a



Zeugniß.

Daß Herr Páll Thorlakſon,
gebürtig von Huſavik in Island,
ſeit November 1872 bis 30. Juni 1875
in dem hieſigen Concordia-Seminar der deutſchen evangeliſch-lutheriſchen Synode von Miſſouri, Ohio u. a. St. dem Studium der Theologie mit groſsem Fleiße obgelegen, ſich dabei eines rechtſchaffenen Wandels befleißigt und in dem vorſchriftsmäßig mit ihm angeſtellten öffentlichen **Examen pro Candidatura** zu Uebernahme des heiligen Predigtamts als ſehr wohl vorbereitet ſich erwieſen habe: ſolches wird demſelben unter Anwünſchung göttlichen Segens hierdurch nach Pflicht und Gewiſſen bezeugt.

St. Louis im Staate Miſſouri den 30. Juni 1875.

Das Lehrercollegium:
C. F. W. Walther, Praes
G. Schaller, Prof.
M. Günther.
A. Crämer, Prof

Paul Thorlaksson's Graduation Diploma. Paul graduated in Theology from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri in 1875.

reactionary who eschewed free inquiry and refused to admit any developments in doctrine after the time of Luther and his immediate followers. There was, however, no question of the profundity of his own learning or his original intention to make Concordia Seminary a centre of the highest type of German scholarship, but in this aim he was unfortunately thwarted. When two of his protégés defected to Roman Catholicism, one in 1869, the other in 1871, the members of the Missouri Synod came to distrust scholarship in general and "were not ready to require scholarship as a prime requisite in a seminary teacher; orthodoxy was apt to be lacking in one of too much learning. . . . The high hopes for a faculty of scholars committed to confessional Lutheranism gave way to measures of expediency at the partial expense of scholarship."[9]

Still, it was not the depth of Dr. Walther's learning that made the most profound impression on Paul Thorlaksson and his fellow students. In 1894, referring to Concordia Seminary in an address delivered at the unveiling of a memorial stone to Paul Thorlaksson in the cemetery of the Víkur church at Mountain, North Dakota, the Reverend F.J. Bergmann, leader of the liberal wing of Icelandic Lutheranism in America at that time, remarked:

> I recall the appraisal of that school made by a highly gifted man who was there for three years at the same time as Pastor Paul, was graduated with him and is now a professor at Minnesota State University. I have heard that man comment, "What we carried away with us from that school was not primarily knowledge. We could have acquired as much, if not more, elsewhere. No, it was the concept of a minister, his inner and outward requisites, that Professor Walther taught us, that was by far the finest of all we carried away with us from that school. This concept of the minister, which became there an integral part of our blood and being, was of greater value than everything else. And I do not know where else that could have been taught so well and in so pure a form."[10]

Paul Thorlaksson's diploma from Concordia Seminary is dated June 30, 1875 and is signed by C.F.W. Walther, President, and Professors G. Schaller, M. Günther and A. Crämer.

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1. Atli Hrafn Kristinsson, "Brefasamband Thorláks frá Stóru-Tjörnum og Tryggva Gunnarssonar," pp. 19-22.

2. *Framfari,* Feb. 12, 1878.

3. Hjörtur Pálsson, *Alaskaför Jóns Ólafssonar, 1874,* p. 30.

4. Letters of Jón Ólafsson to Jón Bjarnason 1873-1875. Special Collections, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba. Cited by Jónas Thór, "A Religious Controversy among Icelandic Canadians in North America 1874-1880," p. 38.

5. The Rev. S.T. Geelmuyden was born in Norway in 1837. After serving St. Olaf Lutheran Church at Tolen, Wisconsin, he came to Our Savior's in Milwaukee in 1872 and served there until 1881, when he returned to Norway to serve a parish near Bergen rather than become involved in an American doctrinal dispute.

He is described by his contemporaries as having had a keen sense of humour. As Paul Thorlaksson's sense of humour is apparent from many of his letters which have been preserved, it is quite possible that both he and Pastor Geelmuyden were "pulling the leg" of Jón Ólafsson. A few years later, in 1878, after Jón Ólafsson had returned to Iceland, the story about devil possession had been related to Pastor Björn Halldorsson, who referred to it facetiously in a letter to Paul Thorlaksson, attributing it to the malice of Jón Ólafsson.

With the growth of Our Savior's congregation, a new church was eventually built at West Scott and South Ninth Streets in Milwaukee, which is now one of the large churches affiliated with the American Lutheran Church. The old property, where the Icelandic service was held, was subsequently sold and moved to West Scott Street between South Twelfth and South Fourteenth, where it was next used by a Haugian congregation and then by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Saint Mary.

6. Daniel Willard Fiske (1831-1904) was Librarian and Professor of North European Languages at Cornell University from 1868 to 1883. Scholar, book collector, student of Icelandic civilization, newspaperman, book dealer and diplomat, he presented his own book collections to Cornell and donated a fund of more than half a million dollars for the use and purposes of the Cornell University Library. The Icelandic collection there, largest in the United States, is named in his memory.

Rasmus B. Anderson (1846-1936) was Professor of Scandinavian Languages at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Author and translator of numerous works from Norwegian into English, he was also for a time United States Ambassador to Denmark. A chapter from Professor Anderson's autobiography was reprinted in the Spring 1974 issue of *The Icelandic-Canadian Magazine.* When writing this chapter, Prof. Anderson's memories of the 1870s were no longer entirely reliable and there is consequently some confusion with regard to individuals and dates.

7. Theodore Buenger, "St. Louis Seminary, Reminiscences 1879-1882," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* XIII, 4 (1941): 97-101.

8. C.S. Meyer, *Log Cabin to Luther Tower,* p. 50 f.

9. *Ibid.,* p. 56.

10. *Sameiníngin* IX, 9 (November 1894): 167.

VIII

THE RELIGIOUS CLIMATE

AN UNSETTLED RELIGIOUS CLIMATE existed in the settlements of the Icelandic and Norwegian Lutherans during the early pioneer years. Paul Thorlaksson had chosen to ally himself with the Norwegian Synod, and it was that church body that sponsored him. As a consequence he began his theological studies at the Concordia Seminary.

The Synod, however, was not accepted by all the settlers and was criticized to varying degrees by those who opposed it. This opposition was found not only in rival Norwegian church bodies but also in the Icelandic colonies. Neither did the Synod find favour with the general public.

Jón Bjarnason's hostility to the Synod seems to have been primarily a reaction against that body's insistence on the plenary inspiration of Holy Scripture, a doctrine at variance with the scriptural interpretation Jón had been taught in Iceland. His opposition, however, was aggravated to some extent by his antipathy towards certain individuals within the Synod.

Norwegian pietists flaunted their contempt for the traditional practices favoured by the Synod. Among the early Norwegian immigrants to the United States, who began arriving there in 1825, were a number of pietists, followers of a movement initiated in Norway by Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771-1824). Hauge was a powerful lay preacher who is generally credited with having brought to his countrymen a fervent message of repentance and regeneration. From 1804 until 1811, however, he was imprisoned, not only for violations of the anti-conventicle act of 1741, which prohibited gatherings for religious observance except in the presence of an ordained minister of the state church, but also for his criticisms of the state church and its clergy. Nevertheless, before his death in 1824, Hauge cautioned his followers against separatism and urged them to remain faithful to the state church.

The positive elements in Hauge's teaching struck a responsive chord even in High Church circles in Norway. Gisle Johnson (1822-1894), one of the most influential professors of theology at the University of Christiania (now Oslo, established in 1811), taught a blend of Lutheran orthodoxy and pietism. When his students emigrated to America to serve the growing number of Norwegian communities, however, they were unable to find accommodations with the pietists there, whose leader was a dour, uncompromising puritan, Elling Eielsen.

The pastors trained by Gisle Johnson conceded the propriety of lay preaching under certain circumstances; when, for example, no ordained pastor was available. Eielsen, on the other hand, disdained and sneered at the educated clergy. Although ordained, he was actually anti-clerical. He ridiculed the liturgical practices of traditional Norwegian Lutheranism and was contemptuous of all endeavours to provide orderliness in the conduct of meetings and services. In their book, *The Lutheran Church among Norwegian Americans,* Nelson and Fevold write: "The Eielsen sympathizers detested formal worship as the cloak of the devil. The Norwegian Synod, they concluded, was only giving aid and comfort to his infernal majesty by the retention of the old forms."[1]

E. Clifford Nelson and Eugene L. Fevold are eminent historians of Lutheranism in the United States. According to them, the two most prominent Lutheran church bodies in the United States by the 1850s were:

> . . . the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States. The former, a federation of district synods, was organized in 1820 and included representatives of a relatively weak confessional point of view commonly known as 'American Lutheranism'. . . . The Norwegians as a whole, and the Synod in particular, viewed this wing of Lutheranism with profound suspicion. . . . On the other hand, the Norwegian Synod developed a deep affection for the Missouri Synod, which since its inception in 1847, had brought a strong confessional reaction into American Lutheranism.[2]

From 1859, therefore, until 1876 when the Norwegian Synod organized its own theological seminary at Madison, Wisconsin, it arranged to have its prospective American-born ministers educated at Concordia, the seminary of the Missouri Synod at St. Louis, Missouri. In this connection a Norwegian professorship was established there.

From the theological viewpoint of the heads of the Norwegian Synod, the arrangement with Concordia at first seemed to be ideal. Faced with opposition from rival Norwegian Lutheran bodies and subjected to proselyting activity on the part of other Protestant churches,[3] they recognized the acute need for trained American-born pastors to serve the increasing numbers of Norwegian immigrants.

The association with the Missouri Synod and Concordia Seminary served, on the other hand, to bring disrepute upon the Norwegian Synod in ways the general public understood more easily than they did the theological issues.

With its headquarters in Missouri, a southern state which still condoned slavery, the Missouri Synod supported the premise that the institution of slavery could not, on the basis of any particular scriptural passage, be regarded as sinful. All the Norwegian immigrants, however, had settled north of the Mason-Dixon Line and were unanimously opposed to slavery. Therefore, when the Reverend K. Larsen, speaking officially for the Norwegian Synod, reiterated the position of the Missouri Synod, his statement evoked contempt for the Norwegian Synod by other church bodies in the northern states and resulted in the withdrawal of some congregations from the Synod.

Another issue in the minds of the public was that of the school system. One of the most cherished institutions of Protestantism in America was the public school system. Under the influence of the Missouri Synod, however, a system of parochial schools was endorsed by the clergy of the Norwegian Synod, "who were hostile to the American public school because they regarded it irreligious, inefficient, and unsuited to the needs of the Norwegian pioneers."[4] Most American Protestants felt it was inconceivable that other Protestants could entertain such views.

The unpopularity of the Norwegian Synod was the result of other factors as well. As Nelson and Fevold have noted:

> Convinced . . . that Scripture was to be equated with the Word of God and that exegetically each verse allowed only one interpretation, the pastors became unyielding in their orthodoxy and determined

> that church unity could be achieved only on the basis of complete doctrinal agreement which was described as "spiritual unity." Lacking this, there could be no religious fellowship. Since many of the other Norwegian Lutherans were, in the opinion of the Synod pastors, guilty of doctrinal errors, there could be no cooperation with them without involving the Synod itself in sin. . . . This uncompromising concern for what it considered to be Lutheran orthodoxy was united with a high regard for the liturgical practices of the Dano-Norwegian churches. Traditional forms of worship, including chanting of the collects and the benediction, were scrupulously preserved. The historic vestments of the Norwegian state church, consisting of a loose-fitting black cassock, stole, and white fluted collar, were consistently worn by Synod pastors. Here again the Synod was charged by its rivals with lacking true spirituality. . . . This, then was "the mind of the Synod," theological orthodoxy bordering on uncharitableness and churchly order clinging firmly to traditional practices.[5]

Nor did the Norwegian Synod's relatively autocratic form of church government, government from above, which "weighted the balances of authority in favor of the synod rather than the congregations,"[6] create any goodwill in the democratic United States.

Undoubtedly, numerous valid reasons could have been adduced to justify rejection of the Norwegian Synod, most of them only tangential, however, to doctrinal issues. Yet, ironically, much of the criticism fomented in Icelandic circles was directed against two laudable forms of Christian activity in which the Synod engaged: the establishment of a college and of home-mission activity.

After a few errors of judgement in the acquisition of land, the Norwegians belonging to the Synod prospered in America and contributed very generously to the support of their churches. In fact, within a very short time, they succeeded in establishing an institution of higher learning, Luther College at Decorah, Iowa, at a cost of some $80,000, a substantial sum in those pioneer days.

The Reverend Herman A. Preus, President of the Norwegian Synod from 1862 until 1894, was a vigorous promoter of home-mission activity, a field in which the state churches of Europe had never engaged. He stated:

> All pastors were expected to do what they could for the unchurched Norwegians in their communities. The 1873 convention of the

> Synod, for example, went on record to the effect that pastors, especially those living on the frontiers, must regard it as a *sacred duty* to minister to those who were without pastoral services or endeavour to have them visited. Congregations were encouraged to permit their pastors to devote a portion of their time to making trips to unchurched communities.[7]

The assistance the laymen of the Norwegian Synod extended to the Icelanders in Wisconsin the winter of 1873-1874, and to their less fortunate fellows who were lured by Canadian authorities to the edge of the rocky Canadian Shield at Rosseau, Ontario, was in no way contingent upon the Icelanders' joining the Synod congregations or even attending services. The Synod had no congregations in Canada.

In an article written in 1879, the Reverend Jón Bjarnason conceded he had met some very fine individuals among the Synod clergy, who seemed to have a beneficial influence on the morals and conduct of their parishioners.[8] The balance of his article, however, consists of a well-expressed condemnation of the Synod.

Ironically, the most sympathetic assessment of the Synod clergy and their work was written not by a reactionary or even conservative clergyman, but by an avowed free-thinker, the Norwegian poet Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, who visited the United States in 1881. In an article about his American visit published in the Norwegian liberal newspaper *Dagbladet,* he ridiculed religious orthodoxy, but continued: "These pastors had been a great blessing in the pioneer days, creating ties between the pioneers and their homes and among themselves, offered solace in difficult times and been a support to them and they (the pastors) had shown rare zeal in their calling."[9]

These words could well have been inspired by Rev. Paul himself because he was of that mould. One can criticize his orthodoxy and his so-called narrow-mindedness, but his deeds speak loud and clear for Christ's love and compassion. These qualities never failed him and it is for them and his magnanimity and goodwill that he is fondly remembered. As we will see, he gave nothing less than his life to prove his apostleship. Even if modern readers may disagree with his theology they cannot fault his deeds.

Further to this, the great philosopher-poet Stephán G. Stephánsson, who knew Rev. Paul intimately and who disapproved strongly of his orthodoxy, nevertheless maintained an undying respect and admiration for him all his life. As for Rev. Paul, he reciprocated in kind, regarding Stephán as a worthwhile friend, although he too differed just as strongly with Stephán's leanings towards Unitarian beliefs.

Meanwhile, strife continued in the Icelandic settlement. In a letter to Tryggvi Gunnarsson dated March 9, 1875, Thorlákur Gunnar Jónsson related that the winter just coming to an end, which the little group of Icelanders in Shawano County had spent felling timber on their newly acquired tracts, was said to have been among the hardest in the memory of the older settlers. In this letter he mentions that he and his family are in tolerably good health, and expresses his intention to farm on the grasslands nearby in partnership with a certain Magnús Gíslason. In addition to sowing grain crops, he continued, they planned to cut hay and raise sheep. Like most of the other Icelanders in Shawano County, he intended to purchase a team of oxen but, at the time of writing, his only "livestock" consisted of a young dog and a single hen. At several times Thorlákur referred to a severe shortage of tools and implements in the settlement, as the people had not enough money to buy them. On July 19, 1875 Pastor Björn Halldórsson wrote Thorlákur he was sending him a carding comb from Iceland.

A year later, on August 28, 1876, Thorlákur advised Tryggvi that he had harvested various crops the previous autumn, including turnips, potatoes and beans, and was now planning to sow winter rye. He had also bought two cows and was feeding twenty ewes over the winter in return for a share of their lambs the next spring.[10]

One of the Shawano colonists, Jón Jónsson from Mjóadal in Sudur-Thingeyjarsýsla (1834-1902), kept a diary and record of his accounts from 1853 until 1901.[11] In 1875 and 1876 his income was barely sufficient to meet expenses, but after that there was generally a small surplus, and the value of his holdings continued to increase. At the end of 1877 he reported eight acres cleared and under cultivation, with crops of wheat, oats, rye, corn, potatoes, cabbage, kohlrabi, turnips and beans.

After living in Shawano County about six months, Thorlákur Gunnar Jónsson wrote a long letter, setting forth what he considered all the advantages of Shawano for Icelanders, to the editor of *Nordanfari.* The letter was printed in three instalments in the issues of June 3, 9 and 16, 1875. In the issues of December 21 and 30, 1876, Sigfús Magnússon, who had been on the trip to explore conditions in Iowa and Nebraska, took Thorlákur to task for some of his

SÉRA PÁLL ÞORLÁKSSON.

Reverend Paul Thorlaksson, circa 1875. Reprinted from Professor Richard Beck, *Sameiningin 50 ára Minningarrít* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: The Columbia Press, 1935).

enthusiastic recommendations of Shawano. Thorlákur probably exaggerated the amount of uncultivated land still available there, but a good deal of the dispute concerns matters of personal taste. Thorlákur, for instance, praises the quality of the drinking water available, while Sigfús deplores it.

The Icelandic settlement in Shawano County never became populous, nor did anyone become wealthy there during the six years of its existence (1874-1880), but as the Icelandic historian, Th. Th. Thorsteinsson, conjectured, it was probably the most agreeable and pleasant of the Icelandic settlements in North America at that time, with the possible exception of the small colony established in the vicinity of Minneota, Minnesota in 1875.[12]

Meanwhile, Paul Thorlaksson continued his studies at the Seminary and on July 8th, 1875, Rev. H.A. Preus, Chairman of the Norwegian Synod, ordained him at the church body's annual convention. Shortly thereafter Paul rejoined his parents in Shawano County. In August, on the thirteenth Sunday after Trinity, he was installed as pastor to four small Norwegian congregations in northern Wisconsin.[13] By mid-October he had also organized in Shawano the first Icelandic Lutheran congregation in North America, with thirty-five communicants.

On October 19, 1875, Paul wrote from Pulcifer Post Office, Shawano Co., to the editor of *Nordanfari* at Akureyri. Two paragraphs from his letter were printed in that paper on January 29, 1876. Paul's assessment of the situation is cautiously optimistic:

> I was called here to minister to four Norwegian congregations as well as the Icelanders in the neighbourhood, who have organized "The Icelandic Lutheran Congregation of Shawano County, Wisconsin," and have agreed upon by-laws, as is customary when congregations are established in this country. We are all doing rather well here and the lot of our fellow countrymen seems to be constantly improving. Those who were able to sow last spring have already reaped a good harvest, even though the summer has, generally speaking, been rather chilly. Some are harvesting now, some making improvements to their houses, while still others are busy sowing winter rye, sown in the autumn to come up next summer. Although the weather is summery today, people are looking forward to an early winter so they can work in the woods. After the first snowfall the lumber companies from the town of Oconto come up here along the Oconto River with horses and oxen, supplies and stoves, and set up winter shelters here and there, hire the pioneer settlers at high wages to fell trees, saw or

> chop them into logs, and haul the logs down to the river with horses or oxen. Then in the spring, when the ice breaks up, all the logs are floated down the river to a sawmill the company owns. . . . I have heard that between two and three hundred of our countrymen recently moved at the expense of the Canadian Government from Ontario to the Province of Manitoba, far to the west and northwest of Lake Superior. I permit myself no predictions but can only hope that all goes well.

The earliest entry in the Reverend Paul Thorlaksson's pastoral records is dated September 12, 1875 and records the baptism of his niece Lovisa Björg Thorlaksson, born August 25, 1875 to Paul's older brother Haraldur and his wife María Stefanía. The next entry is a list of the names of fifteen members who received Communion on November 14, 1875.

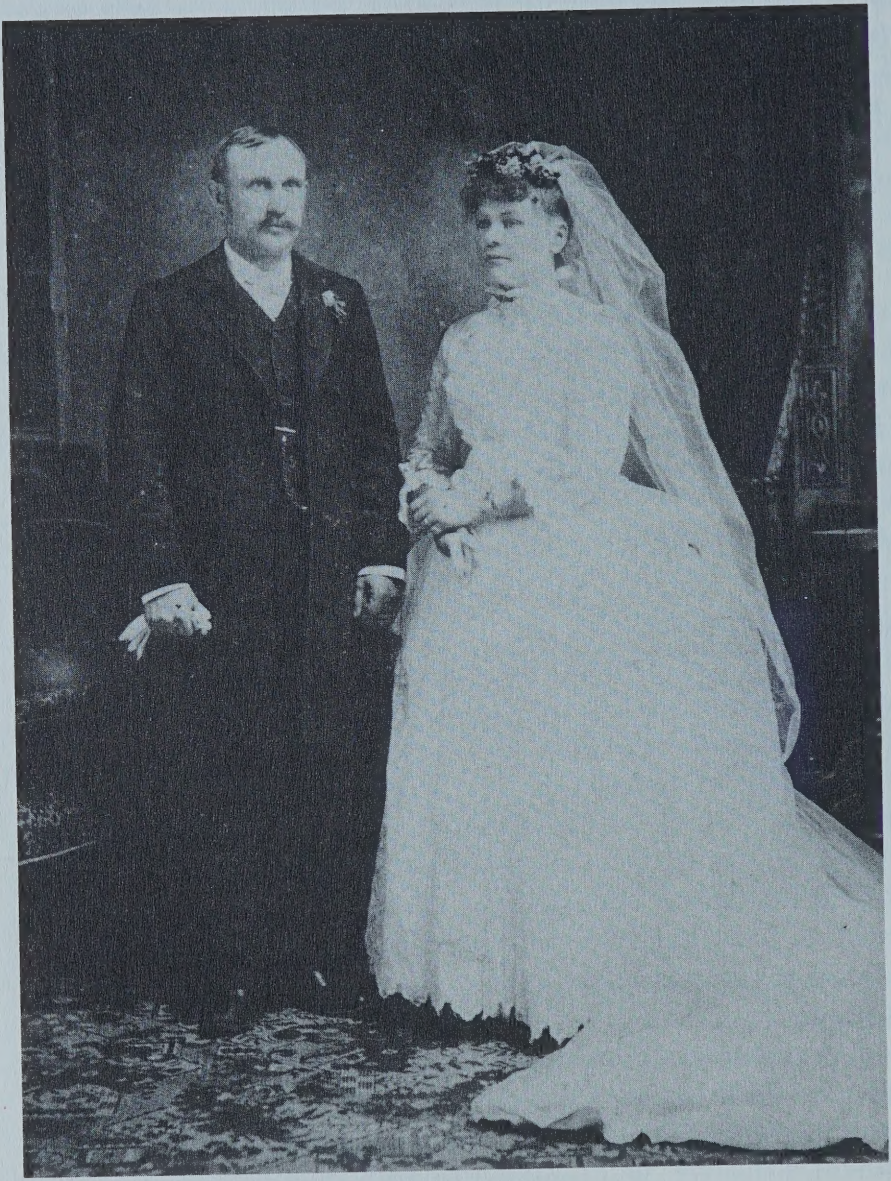
On November 26th, 1876 Paul confirmed six children, all of whom had been born in Iceland: his brother Björn and sister Sólveig; Sigurlaug Gudmundardóttir; the brothers Jónatan and Kristján Hallgrímsson, and Jón Jónsson the younger, son of the diarist, who was elected some years later to the North Dakota Legislature.

Jón (the diarist) notes that after an Icelandic service he attended on the second Sunday in Lent in March 1876, a meeting was held to discuss building a church for the Icelandic congregation. The matter appears, however, to have been dropped, perhaps because the members felt they could not afford the expense. About nine months later, on November 11th, Jón pledged a contribution of three dollars to one of the Norwegian congregations to be applied towards the cost of building a parsonage.

This project is not mentioned again. Th. Th. Thorsteinsson mentions that while Paul was serving the Icelandic and Norwegian congregations in Shawano Co. his sister Gudrún Jakóbína kept house for him.[14] Gudrún, however, was married in July 1876. For the next two years Paul was at Shawano for only a few months each summer and in 1879 he moved to North Dakota.

Years later, the Reverend F.J. Bergmann recollected Paul's preaching in Shawano County. He seems to have grasped the quality of the man:

> As a newly arrived immigrant to this country, a youth of seventeen, I heard him preach God's word to a tiny group of his fellow countrymen who had settled in the pine forests of Wisconsin, and thought I



Reverend Fridrik J. Bergmann and his bride, Gudrún O. Thorlacius. Reverend Bergmann graduated from Luther College in 1881. In 1903 he came to the Winnipeg Tabernacle Congregation which built the First Lutheran Church, Victor Street, Winnipeg, dedicated August 2, 1914. Bergmann was one of Reverend Paul Thorlaksson's spiritual brothers but in later life adopted a more liberal approach to theology than Reverend Paul's strict fundamentalism. Wedding photograph, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

> had never heard anyone speak like him. That was the summer he was graduated from the seminary at St. Louis. . . . It was not that he was particularly eloquent. I had heard preachers who were more eloquent by far. He was a convincing speaker; it was easy for him to express his ideas with clarity, and he talked constantly when he had someone to talk to. But he was incapable of clothing his thoughts in flowery language. . . . Of all the impressions he made on me, I think the most profound was that here was a man who had recently discovered a new world. I found that he gave me an understanding of faith and religion that I had not known before, but which was at the same time not inconsistent with my former understanding and did not preclude it. He raised it to a higher level, made God's word even more sacred, and made me more acutely aware than anyone had before of man's duty to submit himself to it in every aspect of his life. I had never understood before what it meant to be a Lutheran.[15]

Fridrik J. Bergmann, from Sydra-Laugaland at Stadarbygd in Eyjafjörd, born April 15, 1858 (died Winnipeg April 11, 1918), was the son of Jón Jónsson Bergmann, the farmer there. In 1874 he successfully passed the entrance examinations for the Classical College in Reykjavík, but in 1875 was one of eleven Icelanders who emigrated to Canada and landed at Halifax. He spent the winter of 1875-1876 in Shawano County where he was tutored by Paul Thorlaksson, along with Paul's younger brother Niels Steingrímur. In 1876 Fridrik's parents, Jón Bergmann and Halldóra Bessadóttir, came to Canada with the large group and for the next three years made their home at New Iceland. In the autumn of 1876 both Fridrik J. Bergmann and Niels Steingrímur Thorlaksson entered Luther College at Decorah, Iowa.[16]

Although there is no mention of Paul Thorlaksson's engaging in other teaching activities in Shawano County, it is reasonable to assume that he took on the responsibility for the education of his younger brothers and sisters—there were seven by this time—as well as provided instruction for the children of the other Icelandic settlers.

The most intimate and revealing glimpses of Paul at this time are provided by the renowned poet Stephán G. Stephánsson (1853-1927), who was barely twenty-one years old when he settled in Shawano County with his parents. Flippant about religious dogma all his life, Stephán nevertheless became a charter member of Paul's Icelandic congregation. No doubt he did so out of respect for Paul, even if the theology of the two men was poles apart. In his memoirs, written in the 1920s, Stephán recalled that the constitution of that congregation contained only three by-laws, to which members were required to give assent by affixing their signatures. Paul explained to them, Stephán said, that the by-laws of the congregations of the Norwegian Synod were unfamiliar to them and, furthermore, were too complicated.[17]

While living in Shawano, Stephán used to work in the summer as a hired hand on farms to the south and, in winter, in lumber camps farther north. Working with him in the woods were two young fellows of about his own age, who were also members of Paul's Icelandic congregation. They were firm believers in the literal truth and historical accuracy of the entire Bible, while Stephán tended toward scepticism in that respect. To pass the time they frequently argued over religious matters, two against one.

In a letter to his old friend Baldur Sveinsson, dated Markerville, Alberta, June 19, 1910, Stephán gleefully recalled the aftermath of one of these arguments. Despite Stephán's flippancy on religious matters and Paul's strict orthodoxy, the two men were and remained close and intimate friends. Paul was fully aware of Stephán's heretical tendencies, the latter maintained. "At that time I was a lad about twenty years old but, it goes without saying, not quite so thoroughgoing a heretic as I am now. Even then, it seemed that Pastor Paul was constantly murmuring about me. I could recognize myself in some of his sermons."

The boys had been arguing over the "inspiration" of the Book of Revelation. Stephán held it to be simply a piece of highly imaginative writing and compared it to *Sagan af Heljarslódarorrustu* (*The Battle of Hel's Field*) by Benedikt Gröndal the younger. It is a famous Icelandic comic piece, the hero of which is Napoleon III and the subject matter the newly won French victory at Solferino. It is filled with burlesque and extravagant humour.

The next Sunday, Stephán relates, Paul Thorlaksson, who had not been present when the boys were arguing, preached about the mortal danger threatening the souls of those who doubted the inspiration of Holy Writ and dared to compare the Book of Revelation, for instance, to a parody by Benedikt Gröndal.

There was, however, no change in Paul's attitude toward Stephán, and the subject was not mentioned again.[18]

On August 28, 1878, when Stephán was twenty-five, he married Helga Sigrídur, the daughter of Jón Jónsson, the diarist, and his wife Sigurbjörg, who was a sister of Stephán's father. Paul Thorlaksson performed the ceremony and, according to Stephán, declined to accept a fee, partly because of their friendship and also because it was the first occasion he had to unite in marriage two members of his own Icelandic congregation.[19]

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1. E.C. Nelson and E.L. Fevold, *The Lutheran Church among Norwegian Americans,* Volume I, p. 190.

2. *Ibid.,* p. 161.

3. O.M. Norlie, *History of the Norwegian People in America,* p. 190: "The Adventists made a strong bid for their [the Norwegians'] support. . . . The Baptists and Methodists labored among them both long and faithfully, but there were a dozen kinds of Baptists and as many Methodist denominations, so it was difficult to know which one was in the right. Campbellites and Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Episcopalians, all looked upon the Norwegians as their rightful possession and added to the religious confusion."

4. Nelson and Fevold, *The Lutheran Church,* p. 184.

5. *Ibid.,* pp. 189-190.

6. *Ibid.,* p. 160.

7. *Ibid.,* p. 279.

8. *Framfari,* May 18, 1879.

9. Cited in C.G.O. Hansen, *My Minneapolis,* p. 46.

10. Atli Hrafn Kristinsson, "Brefasamband Thorláks frá Stóru-Tjörnum og Tryggva Gunnarssonar," p. 21 f.

11. The manuscript of this diary was translated from Icelandic into English by George J. Houser, Ph.D. Entries from 1853 to 1872, covering Jón Jónsson's years in Iceland, were summarized, but Jón's entries and records of his American years were translated in full. Copies of the English typescript were donated by descendants of the diarist to the National Library of Iceland, the Library of the University of North Dakota at Fargo, and the Elizabeth Dafoe Library of the University of Manitoba. The eminent Icelandic historian, Professor Bergsteinn Jónsson of the University of Iceland, has written three scholarly essays on this diary, published with English summaries in *Saga,* the annual of the Icelandic Historical Society, in the issues of 1975, 1977 and 1980.

12. Th. Th. Thorsteinsson, *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi,* II, p. 230. Th. Th. Th. notes that in December 1875 Thorlákur Gunnar Jónsson, Chairman of the Shawano Co. branch of the Icelandic Association, founded the summer of 1874 in Milwaukee, forwarded a list of forty-two local members to the association's president, the Rev. Jón Bjarnason. Of all such lists prepared at that time which have been preserved, this one, according to Th. Th. Th., was the most thorough, containing the greatest amount of personal information on members. In connection with his son's confirmation in November 1876, Jón Jónsson, the diarist, notes: "All the Icelanders here were present, 29 all told." The Rev. Paul Thorlaksson, however, indicates in his pastoral records (edited by Dr. Houser and published by the University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg 1978) that the Icelandic Lutheran Congregation of Shawano Co. had thirty-five members.

13. These were Strand Congregation at Maple Valley, Oconto Co.; Leeman Congregation at Navarino in Shawano Co.; Shawano Congregation at Jerusalem, Shawano Co.; and Green Valley Congregation, the largest of the four, at Green Valley, Shawano Co.

14. Thorsteinsson, *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi*, I, p. 27.

15. *Sameíníngín*, IX, 9 (Nov. 1894): 167.

16. Thorsteinsson, *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi*, II, p. 293.

17. Stephán G. Stephánsson, *Bréf og ritgerdir*, Vol. IV, p. 86.

18. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 127; Vol. IV, p. 96.

19. *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, p. 80.

IX

IMMIGRANTS FROM ONTARIO

WHILE REV. PAUL WAS LEADING one contingent of Icelandic immigrants, another leader was gathering his own followers. Sigtryggur Jónasson had come to America as early as 1872 and was the first Icelander to settle in Canada. He worked for over a year at various jobs in several Ontario towns and later went into partnership with an Ontario businessman engaged in selling railway ties. That year he cleared almost $1,100.00. Considering that men were being paid $5.00 per week or less, Sigtryggur made a handsome profit. His command of English was considerable and it is no doubt partly because of this that he was eventually hired as an agent for the Ontario government.

The two leaders could hardly have been less similar in character and personality. They were, although neither suspected it at this juncture, on a collision course. Not many months later they were fated to clash, and the repercussions would be felt throughout every Icelandic community. The clash would also open wounds which would take more than a generation to heal.

The lot of Rev. Paul's group of Icelandic immigrants was in sharp contrast to that of their more impecunious "brothers" in Rosseau, Ontario. Rev. Paul had arranged accommodation for his newly arrived charges with Norwegian farmers and because of this farsighted plan, the immigrants were able to adjust to a new life with a minimum of distress.

It was not so for Sigtryggur's immigrants bound for Rosseau, in spite of the free transportation which got them there and the promised free homes and free land.

Rosseau, an area chosen by Sigtryggur for the Icelanders, is about

Sigtryggur Jónasson, powerful and energetic leader of the Icelandic colony of New Iceland (Gimli). In spite of the extreme poverty and hardship there, he established a newspaper, *Framfari*. Photograph: Provincial Archives of Manitoba, New Iceland Collection, 292.

100 miles north of Toronto on the edge of the Precambrian Shield. It is in a heavily wooded district of picturesque lakes and streams, but the topsoil is very thin and little of the land is arable. The area has never been cultivated to any extent; it is primarily a resort district given over to hotels and the summer homes of wealthy Torontonians.

The 365 Icelanders who sailed from Akureyri September 10, 1874 on the *S.S. St. Patrick* of the Allan Line fared badly. Some of this group had intended to continue to the United States, but, upon their arrival at Quebec City on September 23rd, were persuaded by officials of the Dominion government to stay in Canada. The federal officials brought this about by agreeing to three conditions set by the Icelanders:

1) The immigrants were to enjoy full liberty and the right of citizenship on the same terms as native-born citizens as soon as they fulfilled the residence requirements.
2) They were to receive a sufficiently large and suitable tract of land for a colony.
3) They were to preserve unhindered their personal rights, language and nationality, for themselves and their descendants, for all time.

By the evening of September 24th, 1874, the entire group had moved from Quebec into the Immigration Shed at Toronto, where they remained for several weeks while arrangements were made for them at Kinmount, 102 miles to the northwest, where the men were to work on construction of the Victoria Railway.

The food served at the Immigration Shed was sufficient, according to one of the group, Simon Simonson, who subsequently wrote reminiscences of his early days in Canada,[1] but unsuitable for Icelanders, and many became ill, especially small children. A few of the girls went into domestic service in Toronto.

After a gruelling journey, the first stage by train, the last by horse and wagon over rough roads, the party arrived at Kinmount in the middle of the night. Simon Simonson described what awaited them there:

> The following day the people were allocated to the newly built huts, which were numbered from one to six. There was considerable space between them. Our family and eight others were assigned to number 4 hut. It will be left to the imagination what the atmosphere was like inside. . . . The houses were built thus: the walls and gable ends of logs, and the roof of boards. The beds were one above the other, with the ends to the wall.

> It was scarcely possible to sit upright in the side-beds. Such illness prevailed in these huts that the poor children were stricken wholesale. . . . Sigtryggur's plan was to have a communal table, with all alike sharing expenses. This system, however, did not last. There were those who tried to cook and did not do so well, and there were those who pilfered supplies. . . . Sigtryggur and Fridjón [Fridriksson] set up a store in Kinmount for us Icelanders. . . . The surrounding country was not at all pretty and it was difficult to cultivate. It was hilly, cut with gullies, stony and wooded, and was very sparsely settled.

Shortly after their arrival at Kinmount, the Simonsons' infant daughter Gudrún died of gastro-enteritis, vomiting, severe diarrhoea and dehydration. Simon estimates that upwards of thirty children and more than ten adults, principally elder people, succumbed to this acute disorder.

As a consequence of the financial debacle in New York the autumn of 1873, the railroad management was obliged to curtail the original plans to build the Victoria Railway. The Icelanders at Kinmount began to disperse, some seeking employment at sawmills and on farms. Simon Simonson earned fifty cents a day at a sawmill, but some of the farm workers are said to have been paid no more than ten cents a day. Some families moved about fifty miles west to the town of Lindsay, Ontario. Others, including a number of single men, moved to Nova Scotia on the advice of Jóhannes Árngrímsson, an Icelander who had emigrated in 1872 and was now employed as an agent by the provincial government of Nova Scotia.

In view of the news reaching Wisconsin from Rosseau and Kinmount it is readily understandable that in a letter to the editor of *Nordanfari,* published June 3, 1875, Thorlákur Gunnar Jónsson should have tried to dissuade families and impecunious individuals from the thought of settling in Canada. It is a different matter, he maintained, for vigorous, strong men with no dependants. Except for those few Icelanders employed by the Canadian government and the provincial governments of Ontario and Nova Scotia as immigration agents, few Icelanders who had settled in Canada would have disagreed with Thorlákur the summer of 1875.

It was at this time that John Taylor came into the picture. Born in Barbados in 1812, the son of an administrative officer at the British naval base there, he had been educated in Halifax, Nova Scotia and, according to some sources, at Oxford University. He was a Baptist and had studied theology but was never ordained. When he met the Icelanders at Kinmount shortly after their arrival there, he was supervisor of the Shanty Men's Mission of the British Canadian Bible Society and had influential connections in Ottawa. Deeply impressed by the Icelanders he had met, aware of their fervent desire to establish an Icelandic colony in Canada and sympathetic to their plight in Ontario, John Taylor suggested to Sigtryggur Jónasson that it might be worthwhile to investigate the possibilities of the Red River Valley in the province of Manitoba. A meeting was held at Kinmount on May 30, 1875 and the proposal to investigate that area met with general approval. Taylor and Jónasson obtained financial support from Ottawa for a journey of exploration. The party was to consist of two Icelanders, Sigtryggur Jónasson and Einar Jónasson, and Taylor himself. Skafti Arason and Kristján Jónsson decided to travel with them at their own expense. They travelled first to Milwaukee, where they induced Sigurdur Kristofersson to accompany them. They rejoined the others at Moorhead and travelled by steamboat down the Red River to Winnipeg, which until 1873 had been known as Upper Fort Garry.

When they arrived at Winnipeg on July 16, 1875, the exploring party learned that the fertile plains on both sides of the Red River to the south of Winnipeg had already been settled by Mennonites. The immediate vicinity of Winnipeg was beset by a plague of grasshoppers, said to have been swept up by the wagon-load on Main Street, and clouds of which darkened the sky. Since the Icelanders were poor and could afford neither draught animals nor vehicles, it was deemed inadvisable to search for land farther west. After further inquiries the exploring party decided to have a look at the western shore of Lake Winnipeg in the District of Keewatin, just north of the Manitoba provincial boundary which at that time extended west from the present location of Winnipeg Beach. Upon seeing this low-lying tract for the first time in late summer, after most of the surface water had evaporated, the travellers were impressed by the thick woods and lush grass. They were unaware that the underlying clay was not absorbent and that much of the terrain was little more than bog for months at a time. There seemed to be an abundance of small game and wildfowl. The lake would provide both fish and transportation. The Canadian Pacific Railway, then under construction from the east to the Pacific Coast, was to cross the Red River at "The Crossing," now known as Selkirk, only twenty-eight miles away.[2] There was sufficient land for all the Icelanders then in Ontario and the many more it was anticipated would come from the homeland. From the beginning the provincial government agreed to give Icelanders the exclusive right to settle there.

Indeed, the explorers were convinced they had hit upon the ideal solution to their problems.

In Will Kristjanson's words:

> For the colony site, the delegates selected territory extending thirty-six miles along the lake front, from the provincial boundary on the south to north of the Icelandic River, and about ten miles in depth; also Big [i.e. Hecla] Island. They named the region New Iceland. . . . The delegates agreed among themselves that Taylor and the two official delegates should confer with the Government, and following this Sigtryggur Jónasson would proceed to Iceland to give guidance to prospective settlers, while Taylor would conduct the Ontario group to New Iceland before freeze-up. The other two delegates remained behind at The Crossing, where they secured employment . . . at two dollars a day. . . . The Icelandic people in Ontario rejoiced that the question of the colony site was settled, but the problem remained how to get there. Few had the necessary funds. There was, too, the disturbing thought of arriving emptyhanded in the face of winter in a remote and isolated land. Some were loath to make the move that year. . . . Taylor and Jónasson went to Ottawa to request government aid for the move. The cabinet ministers whom they interviewed were rather dubious about the desirability of the Icelanders as settlers, and were reluctant to give aid. The government, they said, had an immigration, but not a migration allotment. At this juncture, Lord Dufferin, Governor General of Canada, proved a friend in need. He held the Icelanders in high regard from the time of his visit to the country in 1856, and now he intervened on behalf of the petitioners, with the result that a grant was made. . . . The period of search, of trial and error, now appeared to be over. Now the people could, with united effort, commence the building of their permanent home in the New World.[3]

Simon Simonson and his wife, who had been working in Lindsay, Ontario, set out with their son Gudmundur on September 21st by train to Toronto, where they remained a few days, awaiting the rest of their countrymen, who had scattered to several locations in Ontario.

On September 25th the Icelanders left Toronto by train for Sarnia, an Ontario port town on Lake Huron, then continued their journey by steamer to Duluth, Minnesota, described by Simon Simonson as "a very small place, comparable to a small trading village in Iceland."

The journey across Lakes Huron and Superior took almost five days. The boat was small and unstable in the rough weather—two of the crew were required to roll barrels of sand against the list. Conditions were crowded and filthy. There was a constant stench from the livestock and most of the passengers were seasick.

From Duluth the journey was resumed by train across Minnesota to the railhead, Fisher's Landing (now Fisher, a small town on the Red River in Minnesota, about thirteen miles southeast of Grand Forks, N.D.). As the crow flies, it is a distance of about 150 miles from Fisher to Winnipeg, but by boat on the meandering Red River, between 400 and 500 miles.

Here the leaders of the party and their families boarded the sternwheeler steamboat. The others, however, were allocated to the flatboats to be towed down river by the steamer. Simon Simonson's account of the journey continues:

> Those on the boats had no place except on top of the mass of goods and luggage, and were without cover. Thus we travelled for several days, for there were many stops for the purpose of unloading goods and taking on board wood for the boilers. To make matters worse, the river had become so shallow, that the steamer grounded frequently, and it was often refloated only with difficulty. This meant much wading and our journey was slow and laborious.

The Icelanders reached the bustling frontier town of Winnipeg on the afternoon of October 11th. For the relatively high wages of three dollars, some of the men worked through that evening and all the next day, unloading the flatboats, even though, as Simon Simonson wryly commented, "they were not in the best of condition for the work."

John Taylor was a devout Christian and a kind-hearted man of good intentions, but he was not endowed with the qualities of prudence and foresight. He seems to have had somewhat exaggerated notions of his leadership capabilities. Jón Jónsson from Munkathvera recalled a Sunday service held in the railway roundhouse at Glyndon, Minnesota on a stopover between trains, where John Taylor, with Fridjón Fridriksson as his interpreter, preached a sermon, using as his text Exodus 23: 20: "Behold, I send an Angel before thee, to keep thee in the way, and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared." Taylor made an analogy between himself and the guardian angel promised to Moses.[4]

The full extent of Taylor's trusting to chance became apparent only after the party's arrival in Winnipeg. There was, admittedly, a certain amount of naïve trust and wishful thinking on the part of the colonists. Otherwise it is difficult to account for their disappointment and shock upon learning only in Winnipeg that there would be no cows or milk for the winter, since no hay had been provided for fodder.[5]

There is a heart-wrenching anecdote about this unhappy situation. One of the immigrant directors made the announcement: "No milk!" The Icelanders at first heard it as *Nóg mjolk,* the *nóg* being pronounced precisely like the English negative "no" but meaning "enough" in Icelandic. The Icelanders' rejoicing was short-lived as the true meaning of the announcement came to light.

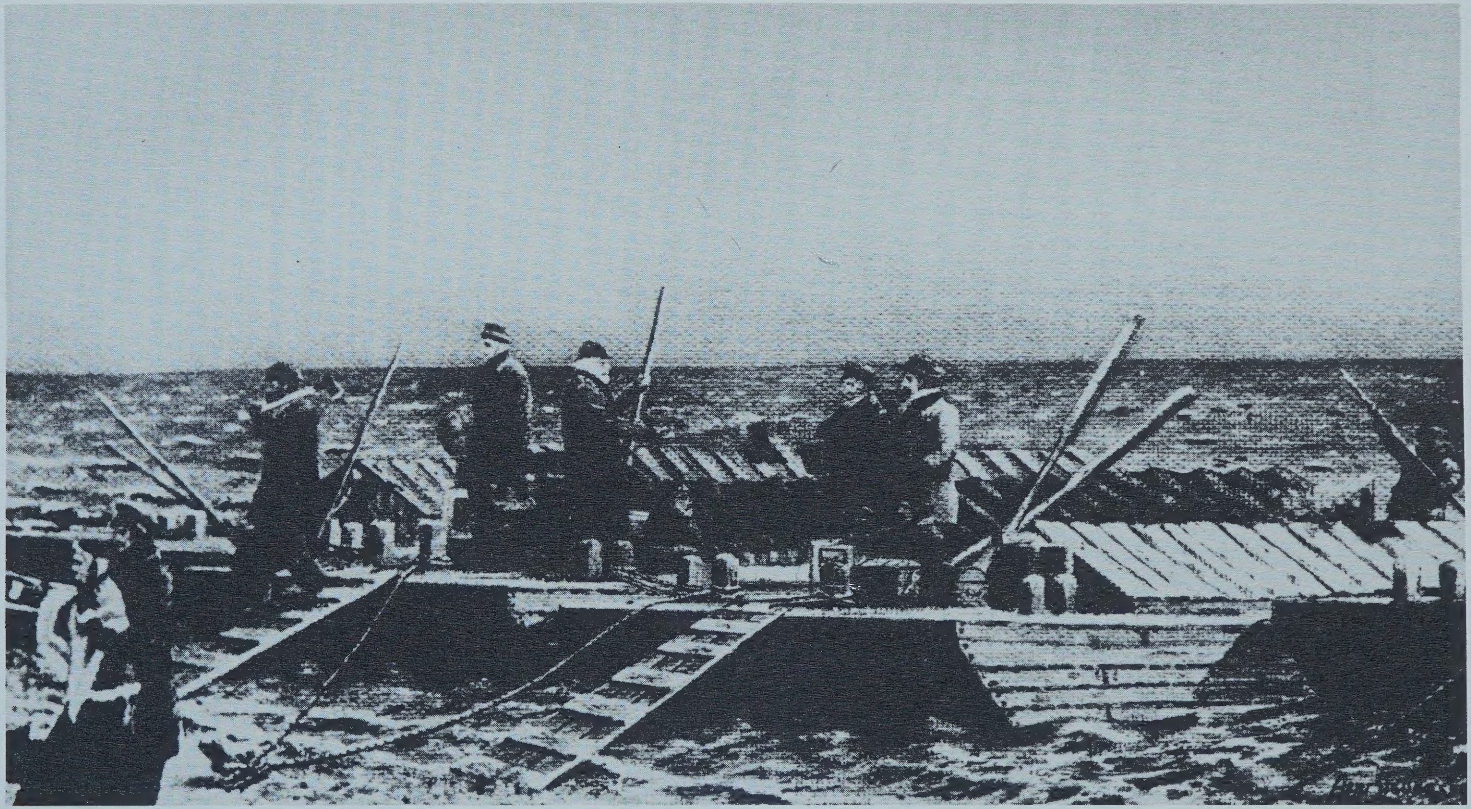
More reasonable was the consternation of the municipal authorities and immigration officers in Winnipeg over Taylor's ill-advised proposal to conduct women, children and even infants in arms into the northern wilderness just before the onset of winter and before any shelter had been provided for them. The local authorities therefore proposed that the women and children remain at the Immigration sheds in Winnipeg until the men had constructed log cabins.

The people themselves refused this offer on the grounds that the navigation season would close long before the men could send for their families. The women and children, they maintained, either had to accompany the men or remain in Winnipeg until spring, and the Immigration sheds were not at all suitable for use as winter quarters.[6]

Consternation must have given way to incredulity from both the colonists and the local authorities upon learning that even though the Dominion government had allocated funds to transport the Icelanders from Ontario to New Iceland, Taylor had not yet concluded any definite arrangements to move his party from Winnipeg to their proposed destination.

It was suggested that the Icelanders be transported in small groups to the mouth of the Red River on a tug-steamer that regularly plied between Winnipeg and The Crossing, but apart from the impracticality of leaving the people stranded only half-way to their destination with more than eighty tons of freight, the owners of the tug demanded a sum of around $1200, a charge for which no provision had been made.

Eventually Taylor purchased at a moderate price six flatboats, about thirty-two by sixteen feet, which the Icelanders proceeded to fit with flooring and roofs. After a week's delay, the freight was loaded onto the flatboats and from forty to sixty passengers allocated to each boat.



Landing of Icelandic Immigrants at Willow Point. A group of immigrants from Ontario and Wisconsin (where they had originally settled), destined for the Icelandic (White Mud) River, were forced ashore from six flatboats and a York boat at Willow Point, just south of present-day Gimli, on October 21, 1875. From a painting by Arni Sigurdson, 1950. Courtesy: Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Collection — Icelandic Settlement 2: Arrival of Settlers at Willow Point.

John Taylor and his closest associates proposed to make the journey in a York boat.

Flatboats such as these could not be steered and were entirely at the mercy of the current. "More than one person," says Will Kristjanson, "viewed the prospect with a sense of foreboding, and John Taylor urged that all those who could find employment in Winnipeg should do so."

Taylor's advice was well intended, but futile. With no more than about 400 buildings, comprising both dwellings and stores, Winnipeg had little winter employment to offer apart from domestic service for unmarried women, some fifty of whom remained there. The sixty families making up the balance of the original party were constrained to move on, regardless of their personal inclinations.

The York boat and heavily laden flatboats departed from Winnipeg on Saturday, October 16th. As the river was low, the boats frequently snagged on rocks. At the St. Andrew Rapids, about twelve miles downstream from Winnipeg, some of the boats grounded and two had to be unloaded. About fifteen miles below Lower Fort Garry the current ceased altogether. The boats lay motionless against the bank, where they had been driven by contrary winds. A baby boy was born on one of the flatboats that night.

John Taylor endeavoured to conclude arrangements with the captain of the Hudson's Bay Company's steamer *Colville,* which was tied up at Lower Fort Garry, to tow the flotilla to its destination at Icelandic River. The captain was reluctant to tow such unsafe crafts as the flatboats on the treacherous lake so late in the season, but as the weather appeared to be favourable, he consented to make an attempt, provided the women and children boarded the steamer. Far short of the intended destination, however, in the face of adverse winds, the captain refused to risk boats and lives any further, and put the settlers with the boats ashore at Willow Point, some fifteen to eighteen miles from the mouth of the Red River. This was on the afternoon of October 21st, 1875.

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1. Will Kristjanson (transl.), "Icelandic Pioneers of 1874. From the Reminiscences of Simon Simonson," *The Icelandic Canadian* (Winter 1946): 40-55.

2. The Directors of the C.P.R. originally planned to have the transcontinental

route cross the Red River at Selkirk. This plan, however, was circumvented by an offer from the Winnipeg municipal government of a tax-free right of way in perpetuity through the City of Winnipeg.

3. Will Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba: A Manitoba Saga,* pp. 25-27.

4. Thorstina Walters, *Framhald á landnámssögu Nýja Íslands,* p. 35.

5. Th. Th. Thorsteinsson, *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi,* III, 23. See also W. Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba,* p. 30.

6. Hindsight shows quite clearly that had they remained in the Immigration sheds until spring, even in draughty quarters, they would not have suffered as severely as they did that first cruel winter. Arriving totally unprepared and unequipped on the bleak shores of Lake Winnipeg late in October was close to a mission of suicide except for the hardiest men. How much greater would their chances of getting comfortably settled have been had they had three or four months of clement weather in which to adjust and prepare!

X

SUFFERING AND UNREST

BY THE TIME they reached Willow Point the Icelanders must have begun to doubt John Taylor's leadership qualities, and some of them perhaps even those of Sigtryggur. After all, it was he who had steered them to this isolated wilderness. Here two more staggering facts came to light. Many of the tents were ragged and torn, and no fishing nets had been packed! Shelter and food are the first things necessary for survival. Why was more thought not given to these essentials?

Tragically, the tents provided little shelter for the snow and sub-zero temperatures which struck the settlers on the first night of their arrival. Only Taylor and a few of his closest associates had tents worthy of the name.

Even more serious than the condition of the tents, which were intended only for temporary use, were the provisions Taylor had purchased in Winnipeg. Simon Simonson, who described the nature of the tents, tells also of the potatoes, which froze because they were improperly stored, the unpalatable pemmican and the poor quality of the flour. The women found the flour unsuitable for baking bread, and the bread "as made by some . . . was not fit for human consumption." There was also coffee in half-pound lots and dried beans, the latter, according to Will Kristjanson's sources, infested with weevils.[1] Food supplies purchased by the settlers with their own money in Winnipeg, Mr. Kristjanson continues, were of far better quality.

On the morning of October 22, 1875, the day after the colonists' arrival, there was inshore ice on Lake Winnipeg. Simon Simonson relates:

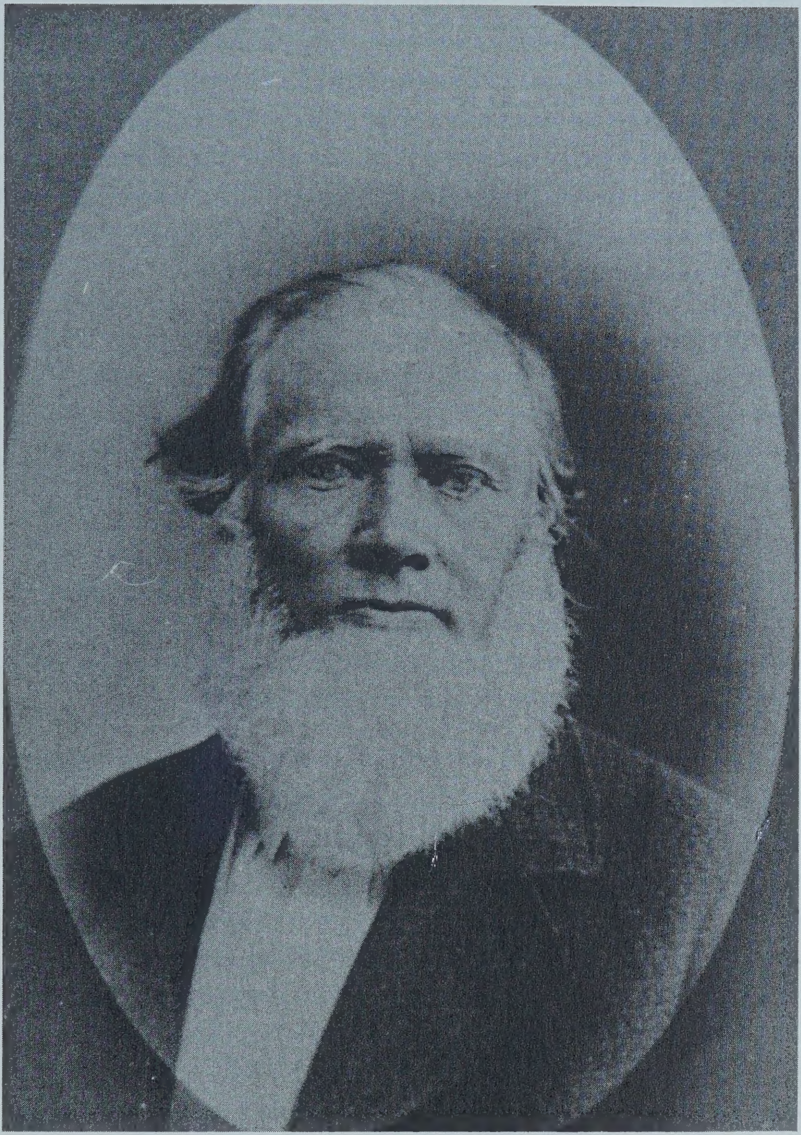
> When the goods had been conveyed by slow stages to our chosen

> location, now called Gimli,[2] the building of the log houses was begun. But at this time I took ill, and for two weeks I lay in my miserable quarters. I was sore from toil and exposure, and my condition was not improved by the unappetizing food. This illness caused a serious setback to my work, for each person had enough to do, attending to his own. . . . Our family shared an old tent with Erlendur Ólafsson and Ingibjörg and their son Andres, who was of an age with our Gudmundur. The two families were thus equal in number, but Erlendur had a little more money than I had. . . . When I was able to crawl out of bed, Erlendur and I turned our thoughts to building. The other settlers had already laid claims to their lots . . . and we were [constrained] to locate in the outskirts [i.e. of the townsite of Gimli]. We knocked up a shack, about twelve feet square and as high as a man, of rails which we had managed to drag to the site. We topped the rafters with withered grass-rubbish from a low spot nearby, and plastered the chinks with clay. . . . The stove was in the centre. We thought this a delightful abode in comparison with our ragged tent. . . . We moved into our new home on Saturday, the sixth of November. My Valdís was not well. [On November 9th she gave birth to a boy, who was christened on December 9th, but died on the 15th and was buried on the 16th.] . . . Our supplies were not greatly augmented by the fish which we were able to catch, for none of us possessed fishing tackle. Lacking, too, on our part, was the necessary knowledge of how to go about lake fishing. Nevertheless we were able to catch a few.

As the sixty families had only thirty stoves that first winter, it was imperative for them to double up and get under shelter as quickly as possible. Therefore, their cabins were all built on what is now the townsite of Gimli. The flatboats were broken up to provide boards for doors and supports for the stoves. Very few of the cabins had wooden floors.

A true Victorian, firmly convinced that everyone else would recognize the unquestionable superiority of British tradition and methods, John Taylor intended to organize all the workers into one party for building operations. The Icelanders, however, were not accustomed to working in large groups. The attempt was a failure and ultimately abandoned. After the men organized their own smaller groups, the work proceeded more satisfactorily, Will Kristjanson reports.

Another instance of poor judgement on Taylor's part gave rise to more serious consequences. As Icelandic Agent in the employ of the Dominion government, he was charged with administering a loan of



John Taylor, the Canadian agent for the colony and Sigtryggur Jónasson's assistant in New Iceland. Taylor, although not an ordained minister, also provided some spiritual leadership for the settlers. Photograph: Provincial Archives of Manitoba, New Iceland Collection, 293.

$5000 to be applied toward the purchase of supplies. After he purchased the supplies, his friend Fridjón Fridriksson, who had established a store, was to look after their distribution. The colonists were to pledge their homesteads as security for the loan. Even though the colony site had not yet been fully surveyed, in the absence of roads and with the land under deep snow, which concealed the nature of the terrain, John Taylor urged the colonists to select sites for their 160-acre homesteads. Simon Simonson relates the consequences:

> Those who were on the most intimate terms with Taylor acquired the best located lots, those in the townsite and to the south, along the waterfront. They went about this very quietly, before many knew what was happening. . . . After [the first of the year] the men began . . . to build on the lands they had selected mostly sight unseen. Some of these lands were miles away, and the snow was very deep. . . . As for the worth of the land, there was no thought given to that. All could see that [it] was wooded, but no one thought about the quality of the soil or about the mud. Indeed, the soil proved rather poor. . . . The houses were built on snow, located in many instances where they should not have been, and they were but roughly constructed.

Sigtryggur Jónasson moved from the colony soon after, leaving it in the well-intentioned but incompetent hands of John Taylor. Even a capable, experienced leader would have been frustrated by the vagaries of the Manitoba climate. The winter of 1875-1876 was bitterly cold. As early as November, temperatures had dropped to forty degrees and more below zero. Inadequate housing, overcrowding and discomfort were the order of the day. The spring and summer of 1876 were scarcely more pleasant or productive. Snow continued into May and frosts into June. As the lake was ice-bound until the 24th of May, there was a considerable delay in obtaining potatoes for seeding, and none were planted before the middle of June. Hoeing was difficult, for in many places the ground was an almost solid tangle of roots. The summer was wet and the hay crop poor.[3] With the government loan John Taylor had been able to obtain a few cows for the colony, but the voracious flies tormented them to such an extent that they gave but little milk.

Most of the single men and youths left the colony in the spring to work on railway construction and on farms in the province of Manitoba, where, in the summer, they were joined by married men as well. Hence, there were few people left in the colony to cut hay for the small number of cows or to prepare the land for cultivation.

Stefán Eyólfsson, who had homesteaded about two miles west of Gimli and was one of the very few men who stayed home that summer, sowed seven acres of wheat, but reported no harvest worth mentioning, due to inadequate preparation of the soil. In citing Stefán's experience, Th. Th. Thorsteinsson comments: "One can then imagine the situation where no one was home except women, children and the aged."

The winter of 1875-1876 was long remembered by Icelanders in Canada as "the scurvy winter." Scurvy is a deficiency disease characterized by swollen gums, livid spots and prostration, and attacks those whose diet is restricted to salt meat and completely lacking fruit or vegetables. In Iceland as well as some other countries this disease was averted by the consumption of "scurvy grass," the boiled leaves and stems of a plant of the mustard family.

In the final analysis it takes a poet to capture the most vivid and compelling picture of those hard pioneer days. "Sandy Bar," the most famous Icelandic poem written in the New World, is a poignant testimony to those pioneers who suffered and endured those early years at Gimli. A translation by Paul A. Sigurdson follows:

Sandy Bar
by Guttormur J. Guttormsson

Once a walk at midnight taking,
Gusts of rain around me shaking,
Sky and earth alight and quaking,
Lightning-blaze and thunder-jar;
There beneath the poplars tow'ring,
In my footprints soaked from show'ring,
Traces of a camp were showing,
Mired deep at Sandy Bar;
Long-forsaken, near-forgotten
Settlers' home at Sandy Bar.

They sleep nameless. To this dreary
Land they ventured, brave but weary;
And how cold and lonely, eerie,
Huddled 'neath the northern star;
Where it seemed, awake or sleeping,
Death was silently up-creeping;
Just as if its raven-blackness
Hovered over Sandy Bar;
For its shadow-doom was waiting,
Watching all at Sandy Bar.

The last call came. The sturdy-hearted,
Stricken, one by one departed;
—Heaven's passage yet uncharted;
Death had come intruding there.
Even the strongest felt their failing,
Feared the unknown deep for sailing:
—Were their souls prepared for crossing?—
Doubts prevailed at Sandy Bar.
Nameless, nagging fears beset them,
Haunting all at Sandy Bar.

Here I lingered, sorrow-shaken,
Thinking on what death had taken:
Homes of promise, burnt, forsaken;
Ashes from a fallen star.
Heaven's flashing shafts were telling
Of the skeletons here dwelling;
Where the settlers' dreams were buried,
In the mounds at Sandy Bar;
Infant-hopes of sturdy manhood,
Come to naught at Sandy Bar.

Here, in vain, they struggled, mired;
Sinewed bodies hunger-tired;
Lost the years they most desired,
Overcome with heavy care.
Body-broken went on dreaming;
Victory-vision faintly gleaming;
Vowed to gain their own distinction,
From the depths at Sandy Bar;
Rise to dignity and honour,
From despair at Sandy Bar.

With me the heavens wept. The thunder
Sobbed and split the clouds asunder;
And I bowed in tearful wonder,
Knowing how they suffered there.
Suddenly I heard a singing;
Axe and hammer faintly ringing;
As the spirits of the fallen,
Came to life at Sandy Bar;
Clearing trails to truth and honour;
Pioneers at Sandy Bar.

May their hopes go onward streaming;
Help the settlers' vision-dreaming;
Be a constant beacon gleaming,
Like a faithful guiding star.
May their spirit never perish;
May the men with honour cherish,
And fulfil their worthy labour,
On the land at Sandy Bar;
Reaching for the high ideals,
Willed to them at Sandy Bar.

They have left a half-told story;
Deeds begun which promise glory.
—All the grasses frozen hoary,
Sprout again tho withered there;
They, like grass-tips first to waken,
Bore the brunt and first were taken;
But I know the frozen, fallen,
Live again at Sandy Bar;
Flourish with a sweeter fragrance,
Round the graves at Sandy Bar.

Suddenly my heart was glowing;
Refreshed, I felt my hopes up-flowing;
From every grave that light was showing,
Pure and eternal as a star!
So let their potent bodies golden,
Forever in their tombs be holden;
Leased of God and now retaken,
Buried deep at Sandy Bar.
More than flesh and all its grandeur
Lives today at Sandy Bar!

Now I knew the storm was failing;
Thunderheads were northward sailing;
Dark and heavy clouds were trailing,
Heaven-opening star by star;
There I saw a highway streaming,
Bright with constellation-gleaming;
Clean and true as men had dreamed it,
Soaring over Sandy Bar;
Heaven, settlement of the settler,
Shining over Sandy Bar!

Meanwhile, the settlers were grappling with problems other than disease and the weather. They needed to elect a village council with the authority to make decisions on their behalf. Elections were held in the village of Gimli and the area to the south on January 3rd and 4th, 1876. There were as yet no settlers to the north of the village. Ólafur Ólafsson from Espiholl was appointed chairman of the council, Fridjón Fridriksson treasurer and Jakob Jónsson secretary. The other members were John Taylor and Jóhannes Magnússon.

According to a letter dated January 13, 1876, written by Ólafur Ólafsson to the Reverend Jón Bjarnason,[4] one of the council's first official acts was to establish a school for the village children. It was opened on January 11th. Instruction was in English. Forty children were in attendance and the teacher was Miss Carrie Taylor, daughter of John Taylor's brother William.

The council had barely been established before its Icelandic members were confronted with a somewhat delicate situation. They were presented with a petition signed by all but a few of the heads of families in the settlement, requesting them to inquire whether Jón Bjarnason would consider coming to the colony to be their pastor. The Icelandic members, Ólafur related to Jón, were all in favour of this and promised to use whatever influence they had to bring it about. John Taylor, he continued, was not consulted and was not likely to be. Taylor, a Baptist lay preacher, had held services in English from time to time for the Icelanders, with Fridjón Fridriksson providing a running translation of his sermon into Icelandic. But now, according to Ólafur, it was the general impression in the colony that Taylor would like to assume the duties of a full-fledged pastor. The Icelanders, he added, were not at all pleased at this prospect. John Taylor was not of the same denomination as they. Most of the Icelanders wanted to have their babies baptized shortly after birth, but Taylor did not believe in infant baptism. Furthermore, Ólafur continued, he was strongly opposed himself to the idea of Taylor's conducting a service of Holy Communion. In his opinion, it would be better for the people to forego this sacrament altogether rather than do anything to detract from its sacred dignity.

This, in brief, was the general situation in New Iceland the summer of 1876. Dismal as it was, it did not slow the general wave of immigration.

The economic depression resulting from the bank failures in New York in the autumn of 1873 had a significant effect on the immigration policy of the Canadian government. As there was no longer a call for artisans, mechanics and industrial workers, the government began to encourage the immigration of farmers and industrial workers.

In the autumn of 1875 both the Dominion government and the provincial government of Nova Scotia dispatched immigration agents to Iceland. Representing the Dominion government were W.C. Krieger, who recruited potential settlers in southern and eastern Iceland, and Sigtryggur Jónasson, who addressed meetings and distributed information in the northern districts. Even under normal circumstances immigration agents from Canada would have been accorded a sympathetic hearing in Iceland. These were not, however, normal times. In March 1875 there had been a catastrophic natural disaster, the eruption of Mount Askja in the Dyngja Range of central Iceland. The fall of pumice is reported to have reached a depth of between two and three inches and to have covered an area of about 2500 square miles, devastating several populous districts of northern Iceland. People residing in these regions were only too eager to emigrate in the hope of finding a better life.

On July 2, 1876 Sigtryggur Jónasson accompanied a party of 752 individuals, mostly from the northern districts, to Scotland where they boarded the *S.S. Austrian* for Quebec. Nine days later 392 persons, with Halldór Briem, a young candidate in theology, as their interpreter, left for Scotland to cross the Atlantic on the *S.S. Phoenician*. Most of these people barely had sufficient funds to cover their ocean passage, with none left over for rail fare to their destination in Canada. About half of both groups originally had planned to settle in Nova Scotia, but in the meantime the provincial authorities had realized that the area set aside for Icelandic colonization was wholly unsuitable for settlement on a large scale, and that only a few families could be accommodated there. Seven families altogether proceeded to Nova Scotia the summer of 1876; all the others continued west to New Iceland. The Dominion government loaned the fare from Quebec City by rail and steamboat to those who had arrived destitute.

The group Sigtryggur Jónasson escorted reached Winnipeg on August 8th, the smaller group on August 17th. The first party arrived in reasonably good health, but the second group had an especially difficult time on the journey across Lakes Huron and Superior. The unsanitary condition of the boat and contaminated drinking water were blamed for a high incidence of gastro-enteritis. Between thirty and forty of the group died, either en route or shortly after their arrival at Gimli, of dehydration resulting from vomiting and severe diarrhoea. Most of the victims were infants and children.

The impending arrival of over 1200 newcomers to the exclusively Icelandic colony on the western shore of Lake Winnipeg was given extensive coverage in the Norwegian-American press. The committee on home missions of the Norwegian Synod requested Paul Thorlaksson to visit New Iceland that summer to minister to the people there, and offer to serve as their pastor for a few months each year.

Leaving Shawano on August 4, 1876, Paul no doubt paid visits to a few friends on his way west to Fisher's Landing where he boarded a stern-wheeler for a journey of several days down the Red River to Winnipeg. A few years later, Paul wrote about an incident that occurred on the boat:

> The captain told me he had recently taken a number of Icelanders to Winnipeg [no doubt a portion of the group escorted by Sigtryggur Jónasson], and he lamented the fact that so many promising people were directed past the fertile, still unsettled, tracts on both sides of the Red River [south of the international boundary] into a region farther north, which, according to him, was uninhabitable. He wanted me to try to turn them back. I explained to him, however, that under the circumstances there was nothing I could do. These people had been promised substantial assistance from the Canadian Government to settle in New Iceland, and since I was not personally familiar with that area, I was in no position to assume it was unsuitable for settlement.

Paul arrived at Winnipeg on August 18th. That same day he baptized five Icelandic children there, then on the 19th read the burial service over two infant boys in Winnipeg Cemetery. He travelled to Gimli with the second group of colonists and, on August 23rd, in the woods just north of the townsite, conducted a service of thanksgiving, the first divine service conducted in the Icelandic language in Canada. Jón Jónsson from Maeri, one of the approximately 500 people who attended the service, was profoundly impressed by Paul's emphasis on the importance of reading the Bible, a subject he had never heard mentioned by the clergy in Iceland.[5]

Paul baptized nine children at Gimli, then on September 6th, on his way back to Wisconsin, united an Icelandic couple in marriage in Winnipeg, twenty-seven-year-old Fridrik Sigurbjörnsson and twenty-three-year-old Sigrídur Jónsdóttir.

Some of the community leaders at New Iceland viewed the future of the colony with unbounded optimism. Paul Thorlaksson's views, on the other hand, were tempered by the memory of the number of infants he had buried there between August 23 and September 3, 1876, sixteen all told, and by the accounts of those who had spent the previous winter in the settlement, trying to provide for their children with nothing but the type of repulsive provisions described by Simon Simonson.

Paul's misgivings nevertheless did not deter him from offering to share the lot of the colonists over the winter months so they would not be entirely without the services of a pastor. His salary would be paid by the Norwegian Synod, at least in the beginning.

He made this offer verbally, then later, in the autumn of 1876, wrote from Wisconsin, requesting that those who wanted him as their pastor sign and forward to him a petition to that effect. In November of that year, Fridjón Fridriksson indicated in a letter to Lára Bjarnason that about 200 people had already signed the petition.

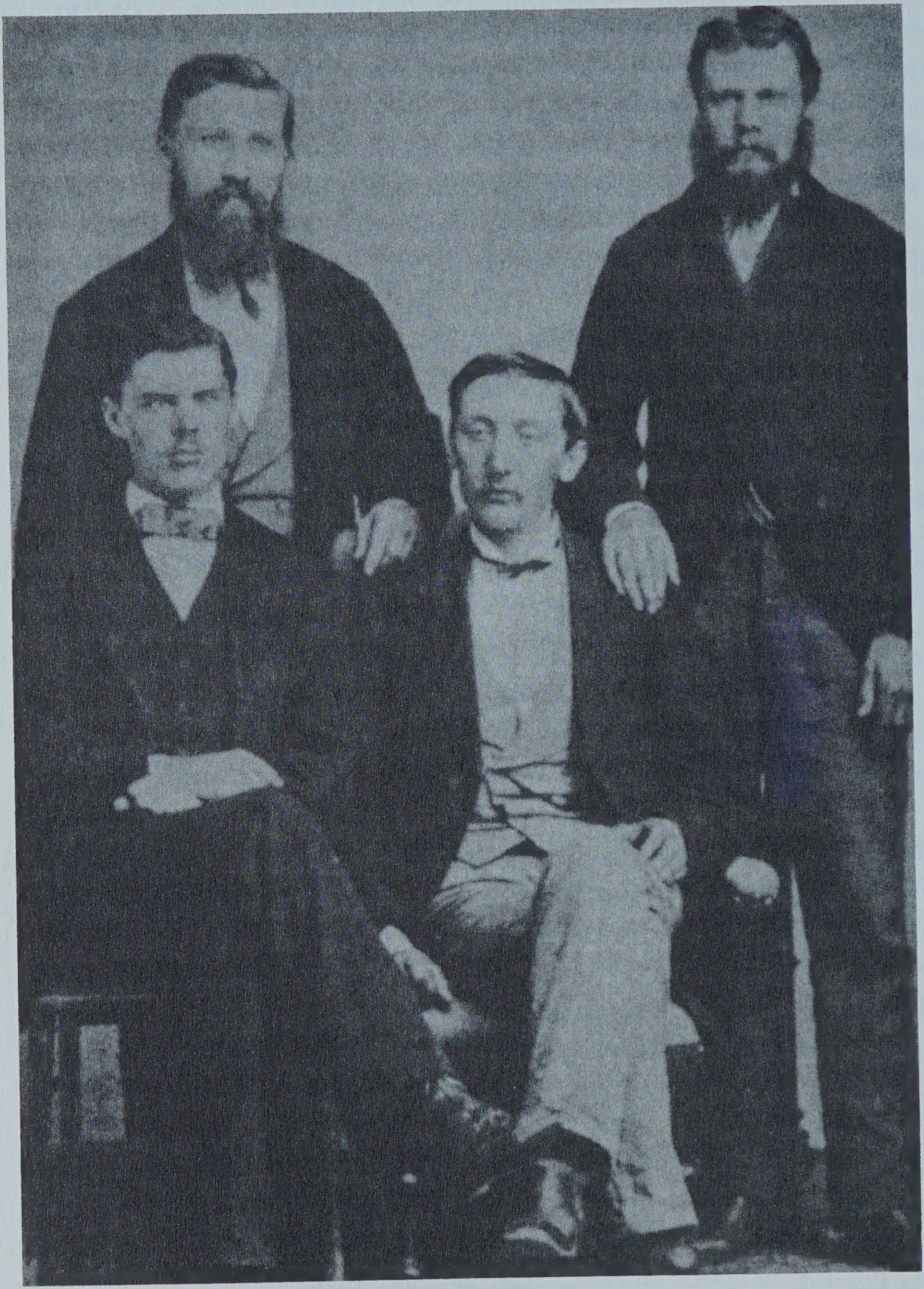
The evening of September 12th, 1876, on his way back to Wisconsin, Paul Thorlaksson called on Jón Bjarnason in Minneapolis, where Jón had moved the previous March to accept the editorship of the Norwegian journal *Budstikken*.[6] Jón and his wife already had two house guests, Sigtryggur Jónasson, who had accompanied the large group of Icelanders to Canada on the *S.S. Austrian*, and Halldór Briem, interpreter for the smaller group that followed on the *S.S. Phoenician*. The following day all four men sat for a group photograph.

We can only speculate what transpired among these four headstrong men. We can conclude with near certainty that Sigtryggur and Paul must have argued no-holds-barred about theology, and violently disagreed. It is quite possible that Sigtryggur developed a strong dislike for Rev. Paul during that visit. From that point on, it seemed they were at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum. They seemed destined to lock horns.

We can also assume Rev. Jón and Sigtryggur became well acquainted and even friends during that period. No doubt Sigtryggur felt more comfortable with Jón's more liberal attitude to the scriptures.

Sigtryggur went on to New Iceland, but Halldór stayed on as the guest of the Bjarnasons until October 10th when he left for Madison, Wisconsin, where for the next two months he was the guest of Jón Bjarnason's friends, Professor Rasmus B. Anderson and his wife.

Halldór and Paul had known each other at the Grammar School in



Reverend Jón Bjarnason, Halldór Briem, Sigtryggur Jónasson and Reverend Paul Thorlaksson. This photograph was taken in Minneapolis where Jón Bjarnason was living at the time. They were arranging for the purchase of a printing press. Reprinted by permission from W.J. Lindal, *The Icelanders in Canada*, Canada Ethnica II (Winnipeg, Manitoba: National Publishers Ltd. and Viking Printers, 1967).

Reykjavík. Halldór had obtained the degree of Candidate in Theology at the seminary there, but had not yet been ordained. At the time he came to America he seems to have been undecided whether to try to pursue a career in the church or as a teacher.

The Andersons extended an invitation to Halldór to visit them in Madison because of their friendship with Jón and Lára Bjarnason, who had previously been their guests there. It was no doubt through Professor Anderson's intervention that Halldór was approached by a minister named Gjertsen, affiliated with the Lutheran church body known as the Norwegian-Danish Conference, presumably with an invitation to become his assistant.

In the meantime, however, through the good offices of Paul, Halldór received an offer from the Norwegian Synod.

While the Norwegian Synod's relations with Concordia, the theological seminary of the Missouri Synod in St. Louis, were continued into the 1880s, in 1876 the Norwegian church body established a theological school of its own, Luther Seminary, at Madison, Wisconsin, and in conjunction with it a secondary school for both girls and boys, known as Monona Academy.

The Norwegian Synod offered Halldór financial support for a full year while he familiarized himself with Lutheran church life in America at either Concordia or Luther Seminary, with a view towards ordination in their Synod. Since he already held the degree of Candidate in Theology from Iceland, he would not be subject to the regulations governing undergraduates, but would have complete freedom to come and go as he pleased and to attend lectures at his own discretion.

Since for several months Halldór had been the guest of both the Reverend Jón Bjarnason and Professor Rasmus B. Anderson, who were outspoken in their criticism of the Norwegian Synod, one would have to suspend his reasoning power or abandon it altogether before he could give serious consideration to Halldór's claim that he accepted the offer of the Synod in total ignorance of its doctrine and practices, but believed it would provide him the best opportunity to gain practical experience in American church life.

For a period of about two months Briem attended lectures and seminars at Luther Seminary in Madison, the head of which at that time was Professor Schmidt, formerly Norwegian Professor at Concordia. From a letter written by Professor Schmidt,[7] it would appear that Briem abused his privileges at Luther Seminary and openly displayed his contempt for the faculty. In a letter to Paul Thorlaksson, dated February 4, 1877,[8] he attempted to justify his conduct at Luther Seminary and abrupt withdrawal from that school.

There is some possibility that Halldór Briem never intended to spend a year at Luther Seminary, but merely set out to create a *cause cèlèbre* to be exploited to his own advantage. However, it would be more charitable to say that even if he had had foreknowledge of the strict orthodoxy, he may have felt that he sincerely wanted to find it out for himself.

The tone of his article in *Framfari,* February 12, 1878, in which he comments on Paul's discussions in the Synod, is entirely reasonable and the arguments he stacks against him are forceful and free of innuendo or sarcasm. Furthermore, the explanation for his reasons for leaving the school suggest no spite but rather a sincere battle of conscience. Here are his words in part:

> After spending some time there I soon became aware of the flavour of superstition that the Pope, for instance, was the great Anti-christ; . . . that it was essential to believe the day of judgment was at hand, and more along these lines. . . . I realized I had only two alternatives, either to abandon my own convictions . . . or on the other hand to hold onto my convictions and spiritual freedom.

The late Reverend Rúnólfur Marteinsson, a nephew of the Reverend Jón Bjarnason and a man who in his writings was consistently sympathetic towards Halldór Briem, reported that even before the altercation with Professor Schmidt which led to Briem's withdrawal from Luther Seminary, he had approached another school in Minneapolis with regard to a teaching post. This school was Augsburg Seminary, operated by still another Lutheran church body. Briem was advised there might possibly be an opening for him there, but not before January 1877. The position did not materialize, however, and he remained on as the guest of the Bjarnasons in Minneapolis until May 25, 1877, when he left for Copenhagen.[9]

Soon after Paul Thorlaksson's departure from New Iceland in September 1876, disease broke out in the colony. Although the disease was relatively mild at first, in a month it was recognized to be smallpox. Winter had set in early—there were eighteen inches of snow on October 5th—and due to the extreme difficulty of clearing the land, even pathways from the lake to inland homesteads, families again doubled up in overcrowded, unsanitary and unventilated temporary housing. December temperatures ranging from fifty-six to sixty-three degrees below zero contributed to the misery. As the settlers had not yet learned the technique of fishing successfully through the ice, the diet that winter consisted largely of frozen potatoes and a jelly-like trash fish called the maria,[10] caught through the ice with line and sinker.

From one-third to one-half the population contracted smallpox and 102 people died. Although no cases were reported after April 1877, the quarantine which had been imposed on the colony on November 27, 1876 was not lifted until July 20, 1877.

Over the winter, at the expense of the Dominion government, the colonists had constructed a road thirty-six miles long, the length of the colony, from Netley Creek in the south to the Icelandic River in the north. This road facilitated winter travel to some extent, but it was impassable in spring and in wet weather.

With the exception of Big Island, all the colony had now been surveyed. From Netley Creek to Sandy Bar, just southeast of the mouth of the Icelandic River, all the homesteads along the lake had been occupied.

In addition to the loan extended by the Dominion government to the 1876 settlers to cover their transportation from Quebec to Winnipeg, other loans were offered. Will Kristjanson provides the details:

> 1. Nearly five thousand dollars for fares from Quebec to Winnipeg.
> 2. Nearly eight thousand dollars, at Toronto, for implements, net-twine and provisions for use en route to Winnipeg.
> 3. Approximately nine thousand dollars for the passage from Winnipeg to New Iceland, and for three months' provisions.
> 4. Eighteen thousand dollars, in October, for provisions for the winter, one hundred cook-stoves, implements, and forty cows.
> 5. Twenty-five thousand dollars, in April, 1877, for provisions, seed, tools, implements, net-twine, cook-stoves and livestock.
>
> Thus, including fifteen thousand dollars advanced to the 1875 party, the Canadian government from first to last loaned to the New Iceland colonists some eighty thousand dollars. . . . The loan was to date from January 1, 1879, with interest at six per cent, and was to be paid in full in ten years. Settlers remaining in New Iceland were not required to make capital or interest payments for the first five years. The settlers' lands were to be surety for the payment of the loan.[11]

In November 1876 Sigtryggur Jónasson was appointed government agent in charge of administering the loan.

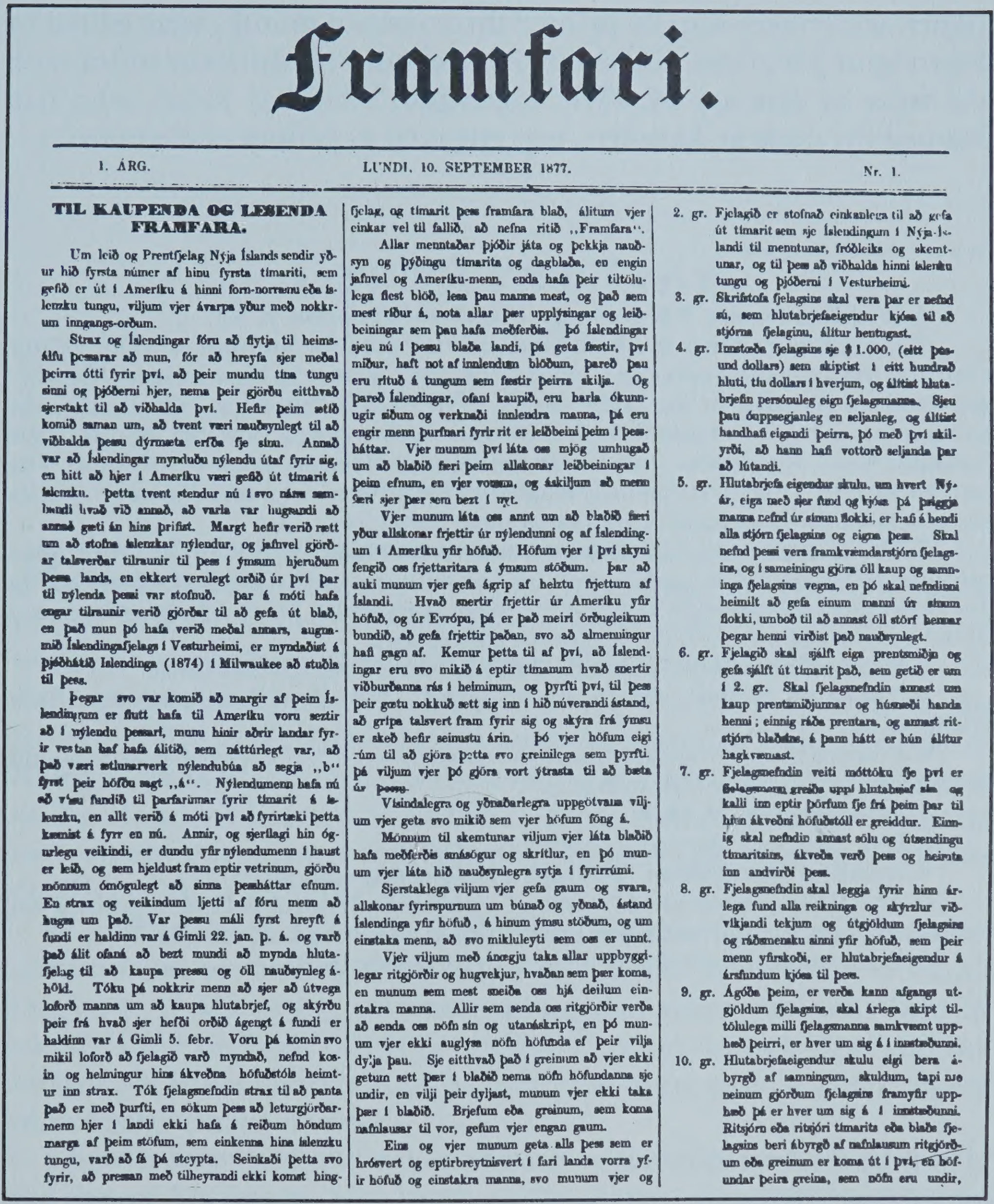
The Gimli village council was replaced in February 1877 by a colony council. The colony had been divided into four districts. These were, from south to north, Vidirnesbyggd (Willow Point District), Árnesbyggd (Arnes District), Fljótsbyggd (the River Settlement) and Mikleyjarbyggd (Big Island District). With the exception of the latter, each district comprised four townships: two broken ones along the lakefront and two complete townships inland.

In each district a district council of five men was elected, including a reeve and deputy reeve. The district councils chose a chairman and vice-chairman to constitute, along with the reeves, a council for the entire colony. Sigtryggur Jónasson was chairman of the first colony council; Fridjón Fridriksson was vice-chairman; and the other four members were Björn Jónsson for Willow Point District, Bjarni Bjarnason for Arnes District, Jóhann Briem for the River Settlement and Jón Bergvinsson for Big Island.

Of these council members, Sigtryggur Jónasson, his brother-in-law Jóhann Briem and his business associate Fridjón Fridriksson were by far the most influential. Sigtryggur and Jóhann homesteaded in the River Settlement, while Fridjón built his home in the village of Gimli. These three men organized the stock company known as "Prentfélag Nýja Ísland" to publish the colony newspaper *Framfari* (*Progress*). Formation of the company was delayed because of the smallpox epidemic, but the subject was brought before the public on January 22, 1877, and by February 5th that year, $500 had been paid in, half the amount previously decided on as requisite working capital. The three founders of the company agreed unanimously that Halldór Briem, Jóhann's cousin, should be invited to return to New Iceland to become editor of the paper.

The press which Jón Bjarnason purchased in Minneapolis on behalf of the printing company was shipped to Winnipeg in May and then to Gimli by May 25th, according to a letter Fridjón Fridriksson wrote to the Reverend Jón Bjarnason on the 27th. Duty and freight charges amounted to approximately thirty dollars. About a month later, when the press was set up, presumably at Icelandic River, it was learned the ink reservoir was missing.

On July 6th, Fridjón wrote to Lára Bjarnason, requesting her to get in touch with the vendor, a Mr. Valdsted, and endeavour to expedite shipment of the missing part. Consequently, the first issue of *Framfari* did not appear until September 10, 1877. The first eight issues of the



Framfari.

1. ÁRG. LUNDI, 10. SEPTEMBER 1877. Nr. 1.

TIL KAUPENDA OG LESENDA FRAMFARA.

Um leið og Prentfjelag Nýja Íslands sendir yður hið fyrsta númer af hinu fyrsta tímariti, sem gefið er út í Ameríku á hinni forn-norrænu eða íslenzku tungu, viljum vjer ávarpa yður með nokkrum inngangs-orðum.

Strax og Íslendingar fóru að flytja til heimsálfu þessarar að mun, fór að hreyfa sjer meðal þeirra ótti fyrir því, að þeir mundu týna tungu sinni og þjóðerni hjer, nema þeir gjörðu eitthvað sjerstakt til að viðhalda því. Hefir þeim ætíð komið saman um, að tvent væri nauðsynlegt til að viðhalda þessu dýrmæta erfða fje sínu. Annað var að Íslendingar mynduðu nýlendu útaf fyrir sig, en hitt að hjer í Ameríku væri gefið út tímarit á íslenzku. Þetta tvent stendur nú í svo nánu sambandi hvað við annað, að varla var hugsandi að annað gæti án hins þrifist. Margt hefir verið rætt um að stofna íslenzkar nýlendur, og jafnvel gjörðar talsverðar tilraunir til þess í ýmsum hjeruðum þessa lands, en ekkert verulegt orðið úr því þar til nýlenda þessi var stofnuð. Þar á móti hafa engar tilraunir verið gjörðar til að gefa út blað, en það mun þó hafa verið meðal annars, augnamið Íslendingafjelags í Vesturheimi, er myndaðist á þjóðhátíð Islendinga (1874) í Milwaukee að stuðla til þess.

Þegar svo var komið að margir af þeim Íslendingum er flutt hafa til Ameríku voru seztir að í nýlendu þessari, munu hinir aðrir landar fyrir vestan haf hafa álitið, sem náttúrlegt var, að það væri ætlunarverk nýlendubúa að segja ,,b'' fyrst þeir höfðu sagt ,,á''. Nýlendumenn hafa nú að vísu fundið til þarfarinnar fyrir tímarit á íslenzku, en allt verið á móti því að fyrirtæki þetta kæmist á fyrr en nú. Annir, og sjerílagi hin ógurlegu veikindi, er dundu yfir nýlendumenn í haust er leið, og sem hjeldust fram eptir vetrinum, gjörðu mönnum ómögulegt að sinna þesskáttar efnum. En strax og veikindum ljetti af fóru menn að hugsa um það. Var þessu máli fyrst hreyft á fundi er haldinn var á Gimli 22. jan. þ. á. og varð það álit ofaná að bezt mundi að mynda hlutafjelag til að kaupa pressu og öll nauðsynleg áhöld. Tóku þá nokkrir menn að sjer að útvega loforð manna um að kaupa hlutabrjef, og skýrðu þeir frá hvað sjer hefði orðið ágengt á fundi er haldinn var á Gimli 5. febr. Voru þá komin svo mikil loforð að fjelagið varð myndað, nefnd kosin og helmingur hins ákveðna höfuðstóls heimtur inn strax. Tók fjelagsnefndin strax til að panta það er með þurfti, en sökum þess að leturgjörðarmenn hjer í landi ekki hafa á reiðum höndum marga af þeim stöfum, sem einkenna hina íslenzku tungu, varð að fá þá steypta. Seinkaði þetta svo fyrir, að pressan með tilheyrandi ekki komst hing-

fjelag, og tímarit þess framfara blað, álitum vjer einkar vel til fallið, að nefna ritið ,,Framfara''.

Allar menntaðar þjóðir játa og þekkja nauðsyn og þýðingu tímarita og dagblaða, en engin jafnvel og Ameríku-menn, enda hafa þeir tiltölulega flest blöð, lesa þau manna mest, og það sem mest ríður á, nota allar þær upplýsingar og leiðbeiningar sem þau hafa meðferðis. Þó Íslendingar sjeu nú í þessu blaða landi, þá geta fæstir, því miður, haft not af innlendum blöðum, þareð þau eru rituð á tungum sem fæstir þeirra skilja. Og þareð Íslendingar, ofaní kaupið, eru harla ókunnugir siðum og verknaði innlendra manna, þá eru engir menn þurfnari fyrir rit er leiðbeini þeim í þesskáttar. Vjer munum því láta oss mjög umhugað um að blaðið færi þeim allskonar leiðbeiningar í þeim efnum, en vjer vonum, og áskiljum að menn færi sjer þær sem bezt í nyt.

Vjer munum láta oss annt um að blaðið færi yður allskonar frjettir úr nýlendunni og af Íslendingum í Ameríku yfir höfuð. Höfum vjer í því skyni fengið oss frjettaritara á ýmsum stöðum. Þar að auki munum vjer gefa ágrip af helztu frjettum af Íslandi. Hvað snertir frjettir úr Ameríku yfir höfuð, og úr Evrópu, þá er það meiri örðugleikum bundið, að gefa frjettir þaðan, svo að almenningur hafi gagn af. Kemur þetta til af því, að Íslendingar eru svo mikið á eptir tímanum hvað snertir viðburðanna rás í heiminum, og þyrfti því, til þess þeir gætu nokkuð sett sig inn í hið núverandi ástand, að grípa talsvert fram fyrir sig og skýra frá ýmsu er skeð hefir seinustu árin. Þó vjer höfum eigi rúm til að gjöra þetta svo greinilega sem þyrfti, þá viljum vjer þó gjöra vort ýtrasta til að bæta úr þessu.

Vísindalegra og yðnaðarlegra uppgötvana viljum vjer geta svo mikið sem vjer höfum föng á.

Mönnum til skemtunar viljum vjer láta blaðið hafa meðferðis smásögur og skrítlur, en þó munum vjer láta hið nauðsynlegra sytja í fyrirrúmi.

Sjerstaklega viljum vjer gefa gaum og svara, allskonar fyrirspurnum um búnað og yðnað, ástand Íslendinga yfir höfuð, á hinum ýmsu stöðum, og um einstaka menn, að svo mikluleyti sem oss er unnt.

Vjer viljum með ánægju taka allar uppbyggilegar ritgjörðir og hugvekjur, hvaðan sem þær koma, en munum sem mest sneiða oss hjá deilum einstakra manna. Allir sem senda oss ritgjörðir verða að senda oss nöfn sín og utanáskript, en þó munum vjer ekki auglýsa nöfn höfunda ef þeir vilja dylja þau. Sje eitthvað það í greinum að vjer ekki getum sett þær í blaðið nema nöfn höfundanna sje undir, en vilji þeir dyljast, munum vjer ekki taka þær í blaðið. Brjefum eða greinum, sem koma nafnlausar til vor, gefum vjer engan gaum.

Eins og vjer munum geta alls þess sem er hrósvert og eptirbreytnisvert í fari landa vorra yfir höfuð og einstakra manna, svo munum vjer og

2. gr. Fjelagið er stofnað einkanlega til að gefa út tímarit sem sje Íslendingum í Nýja-Íslandi til menntunar, fróðleiks og skemtunar, og til þess að viðhalda hinni íslenzku tungu og þjóðerni í Vesturheimi.

3. gr. Skrifstofa fjelagsins skal vera þar er nefnd sú, sem hlutabrjefaeigendur kjósa til að stjórna fjelaginu, álítur hentugast.

4. gr. Innstæða fjelagsins sje $ 1.000, (eitt þúsund dollars) sem skiptist í eitt hundrað hluti, tíu dollars í hverjum, og álítist hlutabrjefin persónuleg eign fjelagsmanna. Sjeu þau óuppsegjanleg en seljanleg, og álítist handhafi eigandi þeirra, þó með því skilyrði, að hann hafi vottorð seljanda þar að lútandi.

5. gr. Hlutabrjefa eigendur skulu, um hvert Nýár, eiga með sjer fund og kjósa þá þriggja manna nefnd úr sínum flokki, er hafi á hendi alla stjórn fjelagsins og eigna þess. Skal nefnd þessi vera framkvæmdarstjórn fjelagsins, og í sameiningu gjöra öll kaup og samninga fjelagsins vegna, en þó skal nefndinni heimilt að gefa einum manni úr sínum flokki, umboð til að annast öll störf hennar þegar henni virðist það nauðsynlegt.

6. gr. Fjelagið skal sjálft eiga prentsmiðju og gefa sjálft út tímarit það, sem getið er um í 2. gr. Skal fjelagsnefndin annast um kaup prentsmiðjunnar og húsnæði handa henni; einnig ráða prentara, og annast ritstjórn blaðsins, á þann hátt er hún álítur hagkvæmast.

7. gr. Fjelagsnefndin veiti móttöku fje því er fjelagsmenn greiða upp í hlutabrjef sín og kalli inn eptir þörfum fje frá þeim þar til hinn ákveðni höfuðstóll er greiddur. Einnig skal nefndin annast sölu og útsendingu tímaritsins, ákveða verð þess og heimta inn andvirði þess.

8. gr. Fjelagsnefndin skal leggja fyrir hinn árlega fund alla reikninga og skýrzlur viðvíkjandi tekjum og útgjöldum fjelagsins og ráðsmensku sinni yfir höfuð, sem þeir menn yfirskoði, er hlutabrjefaeigendur á ársfundum kjósa til þess.

9. gr. Ágóða þeim, er verða kann afgangs útgjöldum fjelagsins, skal árlega skipt tiltölulega milli fjelagsmanna samkvæmt upphæð þeirri, er hver um sig á í innstæðunni.

10. gr. Hlutabrjefaeigendur skulu eigi bera ábyrgð af samningum, skuldum, tapi nje neinum gjörðum fjelagsins framyfir upphæð þá er hver um sig á í innstæðunni. Ritsjórn eða ritsjóri tímarits eða blaðs fjelagsins beri ábyrgð af nafnlausum ritgjörðum eða greinum er koma út í því, en höfundar þeirra greina, sem nöfn eru undir,

Page One of the first issue of *Framfari*, the first newspaper in the Icelandic language published in North America (1877-1880). All issues of *Framfari* have been translated into English by Dr. George Houser and have been published in a single book (1986). The original newspaper was published by The New Icelandic Printing Company, Lundi, Keewatin, Canada (Riverton, Manitoba). It provides an intimate story of the early settlers. Reprinted from *Sigtryggur Jonasson* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Recreation, 1984).

paper, which was usually printed three times a month, were edited by Sigtryggur Jónasson. Halldór Briem assumed his duties as editor with the issue of January 24, 1878. Sigtryggur's brother Jónas, who had learned his trade at Akureyri, was engaged as printer of *Framfari.*

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1. Will Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba,* p. 35.

2. On the way down the Red River on flatboats the autumn of 1875, Ólafur Ólafsson from Espiholl proposed naming the first townsite in New Iceland "Gimli," the word for paradise in the Eddic poem, "The Sybil's Prophecy." Originally, the immigrants intended to establish the townsite farther north, near the mouth of the Icelandic River, some twenty miles from the location of the present town of Gimli. The terrible suffering that first year only magnifies the irony of the name. However, it does say much for the hopes and optimism of these hardy folk.

3. The facts presented in a succinct statement which appears in the *Gimli Saga* are indeed chilling: "The hardships of this first winter caused many deaths from scurvy and other diseases: one man lost seven of his nine children. Many left the colony, but of the hundred or so that remained *about a third died.*"

4. Special Collections, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, Univ. of Manitoba.

5. Thorstina Walters, *Frá austri til vesturs,* Vol. II of *Landnámssögu Nýja Ísland,* p. 97.

6. Perhaps the most suitable English translations of this Norwegian word would be "The Rally" or "The Call to Battle."

7. *Framfari,* Feb. 12, 1878.

8. Lbs. 2595, 4to., National Library of Iceland.

9. Rúnólfur Marteinsson, *Aevisaga séra Jóns Bjarnasonar,* p. 53 f.

10. This is the species called "burbot," which was plentiful in Lake Winnipeg but a nuisance. It was edible but when boiled turned mushy and all but dissolved.

11. Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba,* p. 35 f.

XI

UNREQUITED LOVE

ALTHOUGH PAUL THORLAKSSON was a prolific letter writer, few of his letters have been preserved, apart from those published in newspapers. His exposition is lucid, his narrative style vivid, but the extant letters reveal nothing of his emotional life. Other than his parents, his only confidante appears to have been his old friend and tutor, the Reverend Björn Halldórsson at Laufás in northern Iceland. Some of Björn's letters to Paul have been donated to the manuscript collection of the National Library of Iceland.[1] Two of these contain references to a romantic attachment and proposal of marriage from Paul, but the details are tantalizingly elusive.

In a letter dated April 17, 1877 Björn expresses his pleasure at the anticipation of meeting Paul again in Iceland. He alludes to Paul's reticence in discussing intimate personal matters, and tells him he suspects the purpose of his coming visit, even though Paul did not mention it in his last letter, is to obtain a definite answer to a proposal of marriage (made by post).

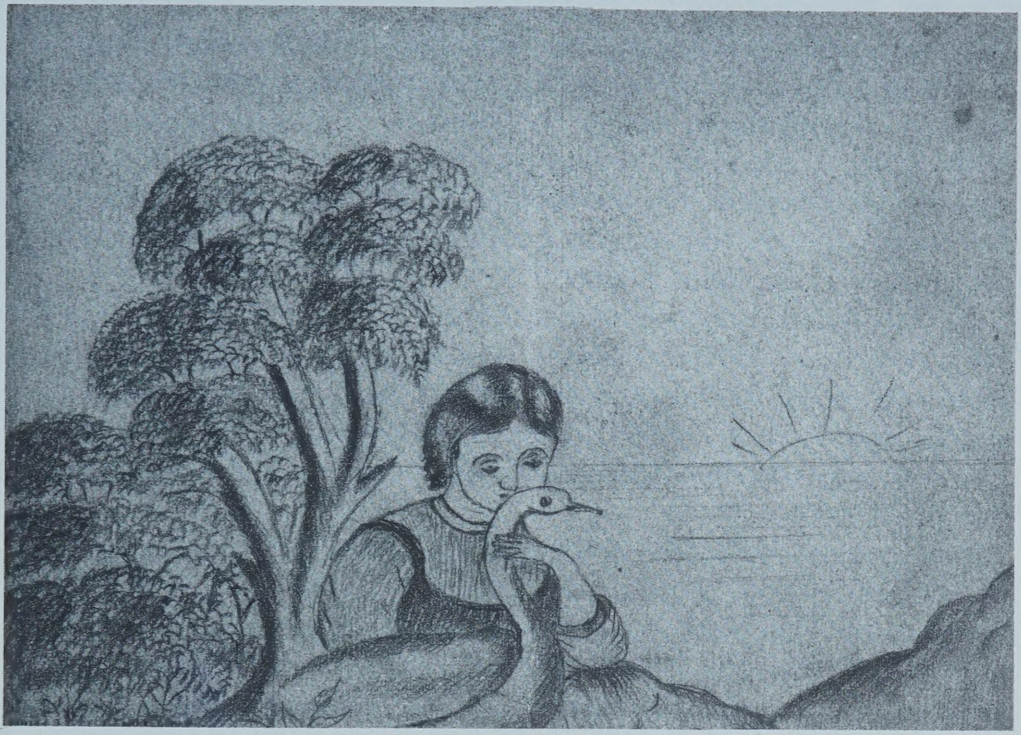
There is no record of the date of Paul's departure for Iceland, nor of the date of his return. Jón Jónsson, the diarist, who habitually noted the dates of each Icelandic service he attended at Shawano, mentions none between Good Friday, which fell in March in 1877, and the 15th Sunday after Trinity, in the month of September. Since Björn Halldórsson expected Paul to receive his letter of April 17th before his departure from Shawano, it is unlikely that Paul left before the end of May or beginning of June at the earliest. An entry on August 19th in Paul's pastoral records indicates that on that date he baptized an Icelandic child at sea on his westbound crossing.

According to one rumour, the girl whose answer Paul sought was one of his cousins, a daughter of Gudmundur Thorgrimsen of Eyrarbakki in the south of Iceland. While it is possible that Paul may at one time have been engaged to one of the Thorgrimsen girls and that she broke off their engagement, it is apparent from a second letter of Björn Halldórsson's that another girl was the object of Paul's affections in 1877. In this letter, written February 24, 1878 at Laufás in the extreme north of Iceland, Björn refers to a girl living on the farmstead Höll, in Grýttubakka Township, Sudur-Thingeyjarsýsla, not far from his own home:

> The girl at Höll would assuredly not, so far as she was concerned, have said "No" last summer, but her mother was adamant. It [your proposal] came at an inopportune moment. Her mother was pregnant, approaching her term, and was, moreover, complaining of heart trouble and worrying that things might not go well. She is certainly still of the same mind, so I am not planning to intercede for you a second time. Forgive me if mentioning this is painful to you. The girl has spoken freely to my daughter and related that, for her part, she would gladly have become your wife. I have been as circumspect as a stone. The ground would now appear to have been prepared for the girl to receive a proposal from a man advocated by the couple at Höfdi [another farm in the vicinity], but who he is, I have no idea. I think it more than likely, however, that he will be encouraged. This is a curious story, but none the less true. It occurred to my daughter and myself that we might try to ascertain whether marriage might still be possible if you were still uncommitted. She [Björn's daughter Laufey] brought up the subject indirectly with the mother, but she is hard as nails. This is a consequence of your having made no attempt to obtain the living at Thóroddstad, for in America you cannot acquire merit in the eyes of Old Grandmother.

The Reverend Bragi Fridriksson has examined census records to try to identify the "girl at Höll," Paul's intended bride. He reports that in 1877 Höll in Grýttubakka Township was the home of Sveinn Sveinsson, reeve of that township, forty-six years of age, and his wife, Anna Jónsdóttir, forty-one. In addition to their two eldest daughters, Dýrleif, eighteen, and Elina, seventeen, they had an adopted daughter, Olöf Gunnarsdóttir, who was also seventeen years old in 1877.

Although inconclusive, there is nevertheless an additional hint that the girl in question may have been Elina Sveinsdóttir at Höll in Grýttubakka Township. A few years ago Margret, the daughter of



A pencil drawing (late 1870s) from Reverend Paul Thorlaksson's betrothed ("from your Linna") in Iceland, found in one of Paul's Bibles after his death (signed E.J. Thorgrimson).

the late Reverend Niels Steingrímur Thorlaksson, Paul's younger brother, found in a Bible that had belonged to Paul a charming pencil sketch of a girl embracing a swan, with a body of water in the background, extending as far as the horizon. The girl appears to be whispering to the swan, perhaps a plea to convey her greetings and love across the ocean. On the back of the sketch are written the words *Frá thinni Linnu* ("from your Linna") and Linna is an affectionate diminutive of the name Elina.

In Háls Parish, on the other hand, there is a farmstead known as Ytri Höll (Outer, or Farther Palace). According to records dating from 1869, uncovered by Pastor Bragi, Bjarni Olgeirsson was living there at that time with his wife Gudrún Ásmundsdóttir and her daughter Sigrídur, who was then fifteen years old. Hence in 1877 Sigrídur would have been twenty-three.

Years afterward Paul Thorlaksson's mother told one of her favourite daughters-in-law, Erika, the Norwegian-born wife of Niels Steingrímur, that Paul's journey to Iceland resulted in a marked deterioration of his health. Unable to sleep because he felt the disappointment so keenly, and pondering whether a solution might still be worked out, he spent a good part of each night walking the deck in the chill Atlantic wind and dampness. His resistance was low and he became an easy prey to infection, particularly of the respiratory tract.

Paul's suit proved to be a failure, and he was forced to return to America with his hopes dashed. This fateful course of events no doubt caused a major turning point in his life. A man as sensitive, as compassionate, as devout and as intelligent as Paul does not approach courtship lightly. His disappointment must have been overwhelming. It appears he corresponded with his friend Björn even after his return, hoping to receive word that the girl's mother had had a change of heart. She did not. Everywhere else in Paul's life we see him as the strong, resourceful, spiritual leader, the man in control. Here we see him humanly vulnerable, and we get close to his heart and soul.

We can only speculate to what degree this heartbreak influenced Paul's life, which, had he married, would no doubt have taken a different course. A married pastor, no matter how devout, may often face a dilemma of whether to place his first duty to his wife or to his flock. Paul never had to face this dilemma. He was not destined to establish a family of his own. As a single man he could direct all his good works outward to his pioneer friends, and those who came to look to him for compassion and guidance were not limited by ties of blood or even distant kinship. Perhaps his profound loss was their great gain. His generous service was extended to all.

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1. Lbs. 2595, 4to., National Library of Iceland.

XII

A BOLD MOVE

DURING THE SUMMER of Paul's visit to his homeland, he was not aware of decisions being made in New Iceland, decisions which would eventually precipitate a clash between him and the leaders of the colony. The three instigators, Sigtryggur Jónasson, Jóhann Briem and Fridjón Fridriksson, had quietly decided to do all they could to discourage Rev. Paul from returning to New Iceland.

As early as the winter of 1874-1875, Fridjón had been trying to persuade Jón Bjarnason to come to Canada to minister to the Icelanders there, but so far had met with no success. In a letter to Jón's wife in November 1876, he told her there were quite a few who wanted to accept Paul's offer to conduct services at New Iceland. He said he did not oppose that offer, because he did not consider it good for the colony to be without a pastor. However, Fridjón soon changed his mind, perhaps at the prompting of his close associates, Sigtryggur and Jóhann.

Why did they not want Paul there? It was chiefly because of his close association with the strict fundamentalist Norwegian Lutheran Synod. All three were opposed in principle to many of the stands on public issues espoused by the Norwegian Synod. They were aware of the opinions Jón Bjarnason and Halldór Briem held of the Synod, and they also feared that the legitimate interests and aspirations of a small minority group, such as the Icelanders, in a foreign Synod would be disregarded. Consequently, the Icelanders could lose their religious identity.

The men of the River Settlement were the first to hold a public meeting, on April 28, 1877, for the express purpose of discussing the building of churches and schools and obtaining the services of a pastor. Jóhann Briem acted as chairman and Sigtryggur Jónasson was the secretary. Most of those in attendance favoured the establishment of an association of Icelandic churches in the colony, with no ties to any other church body in North America. A committee was appointed to negotiate with representatives of the other districts in extending a call to two clergymen, other than Paul Thorlaksson, to serve the entire colony on a salaried basis. The committee also decided to promote the building of churches and to decline formally the pastoral services of Paul Thorlaksson or anyone he might delegate in his stead.

Among the men in the River Settlement who expressed disapproval of this majority viewpoint was Björn Pjetursson, a former member of the Althing, the Icelandic National Assembly. A man of brilliant intellect, Björn was attracted a few years later to the Unitarian movement and became the first Icelandic Unitarian minister in North America.

Sigtryggur, Jóhann and Fridjón had, however, little respect for opinions in disagreement with their own. There was as yet no newspaper in which to attack their opponents, but in a letter of April 30, 1877 to the Reverend Jón Bjarnason, Fridjón Fridriksson referred contemptuously to Björn Pjetursson as "the bellwether of the Synod-men" in the River Settlement.[1]

A few days later similar meetings were held in the other districts. Most of the settlers on Big Island went along with the men of the River Settlement, but a majority in Arnes District and a substantial minority in Willow Point District, a total of 120 families, opted for Paul Thorlaksson. The other 130 families decided to extend a formal call to Jón Bjarnason or, in the event he was unable to accept, to Halldór Briem, Jóhann's cousin, who was, however, not yet ordained. Jón Bjarnason visited the colony in July 1877 and agreed to return in the autumn.

The *Manitoba Free Press* for October 16, 1877 reported the arrival at noon that day of the stern-wheeler *International* from Fisher's Landing. Among the fifteen cabin passengers was listed the Reverend Paul Thorlaksson. The article also mentions twenty-six deck passengers and sixty tons of freight.

On Friday, October 19th, Paul arrived at New Iceland, three weeks before Jón and Lára Bjarnason, who reached their destination November 8th.

There is no unbiased contemporary record of Paul's activities in the colony. The men who controlled the policy of *Framfari* never lost an opportunity to disparage his association with the Norwegian Synod, and as far as possible they refrained from reporting in *Framfari* anything that would tend to place Paul in a favourable light.

With regard to the earliest days, extracts from the diary of Jóhann (Schram) Hallsson, who homesteaded west of Gimli, help fill in the gaps to some extent, but Jóhann recorded only what occurred in the immediate vicinity of his home:

Fri., Oct. 19th.	Pastor Paul arrived.
Sun., Oct. 21st.	Pastor Paul held a meeting in this house, announced that he had come to be our pastor and would explain to us in detail the essentials of his teaching and belief.
Mon., Oct. 22nd.	Pastor Paul returned from Arnes district.
Tue., Oct. 23rd.	Pastor Paul completed a census in the southern part of Willow Point district.
Wed., Oct. 24th.	Pastor Paul came here to take a census.[2]

(In his pastoral records Paul indicated that on October 25th he baptized in the Willow Point District a baby girl born October 11th, the daughter of Sigurgeir Bjarnarson and his wife Gudfinna Jóhannessardóttir, and that the baby was given three Christian names—María, Gudný and Jóhanna—those of her sisters who had perished the previous winter in the smallpox epidemic.)

Sun., Oct. 28th.	Seven of us from here attended a service Pastor Paul conducted in the home of Bjarni [Bjarnason] from Dadastadir. [Bjarni was reeve of Arnes District and called his farmstead there "Höfn."]
Sun., Nov. 18th.	Pastor Paul conducted a service which seven from this house attended.
Mon., Nov. 19th.	Pastor Paul, Gísli and Sigurgeir set out on foot to examine the nature of the land west of here.
Wed., Nov. 21st.	Pastor Paul and his companions returned.
Wed., Nov. 28th.	Meeting held at Bjarni Bjarnason's home to discuss by-laws for the congregation. Nine present, including Pastor Paul.
Mon., Dec. 3rd.	Pastor Paul conducted a service at the home of Jón Hjálmarsson.
Wed., Dec. 5th.	We practised singing under Pastor Paul's direction.[3]

Paul organized three congregations, one in the Willow Point District, and one each in the northern and southern parts of Arnes District. Their names, Vídalín, Gudbrand and Hallgrím congregations, respectively, honoured three eminent leaders of the Icelandic church: Bishop Jón Vídalín, from whose collected sermons passages were read at home when attendance at church was not possible; Bishop Gudbrandur Thorlaksson, who translated the Bible into Icelandic in the seventeenth century; and Hallgrímur Pétursson, whose "Passion Hymns" are among the most beautiful religious poetry in any language and are still a beloved part of the Lenten tradition in the Church of Iceland. Although Paul had no formal congregation either on Big Island or in the River Settlement, in the extreme north of the colony, in the course of the first winter he nevertheless conducted at least one service on Big Island and five in the River Settlement.

He travelled on foot, at least thirty miles in each direction. The schedule of services listed for the Christmas season of 1877 in Paul's pastoral records provides indisputable evidence that he did not minister to his friends in the north merely at his own convenience.

On the fourth Sunday in Advent Paul conducted a service in the Willow Point District. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day he conducted services at Gimli, then later that day conducted another to the north of Gimli, in the Arnes District. On Boxing Day there was another service in Arnes District, the following day one in the River Settlement, then on the Sunday after Christmas a service some thirty miles to the south on the farmstead Nýhagi in the Willow Point District. Paul was in Gimli on New Year's Day 1878, but on Epiphany he conducted a service in Winnipeg. From this gruelling schedule we can conclude that in a span of two weeks Paul covered a distance of about 120 miles—on foot! And a few days later he walked to Winnipeg, another sixty miles.

According to Th. Th. Thorsteinsson, the noted historian, Paul's midwinter visit to Winnipeg was prompted not only by the desire to give his countrymen Christian service, but also to sound out the possibilities of employment for some of the young people in his congregations with English-speaking families and business concerns.[4]

Forty years ago, when Thorsteinsson was compiling material for his authoritative history of New Iceland and Icelandic settlements in North America, he was unable to find anyone who could provide information on the schools and Sunday schools Paul Thorlaksson had instituted in his congregations. Some people, Thorsteinsson said, deny that the children in these congregations were provided any instruction whatever. He concedes that the details of such instruction may well have been forgotten with the passing of two generations, but he notes, on the other hand, that two paragraphs of the by-laws adopted by Paul's congregations, No. 12 and No. 19, refer specifically to an elementary teacher in the congregation. There is strong evidence of Rev. Paul's thoroughness in every duty he undertook. He would hardly have neglected the children.

As further evidence, Paul wrote a news article dated Gimli, October 9th, 1878, printed in the *Evangelisk Luthersk Kirketidende,* organ of the Norwegian Synod, published at Decorah, Iowa. It was subsequently translated into Icelandic by the editor of *Framfari* and published in the issue of January 7, 1879. In this article Paul mentions that Fridrik Bergmann, a student at Luther College, Decorah, taught school in his congregations during his absence from New Iceland the previous summer.

Paul's statement is confirmed by another news item printed in *Framfari* for July 24, 1878: "Fridrik Bergmann, son of Jón Bergmann of Gimli, student at the school in Decorah, came here to the colony last month. He is teaching school in Pastor Paul's congregations this summer."

Although *Framfari* reported in detail on the nature of the instruction provided at Gimli by the Reverend Jón Bjarnason and his wife Lára, there is no printed information whatever as to whether the children in Paul's congregations went to a particular place or were taught in their homes. Nor is there any indication as to when Paul's schools were established.

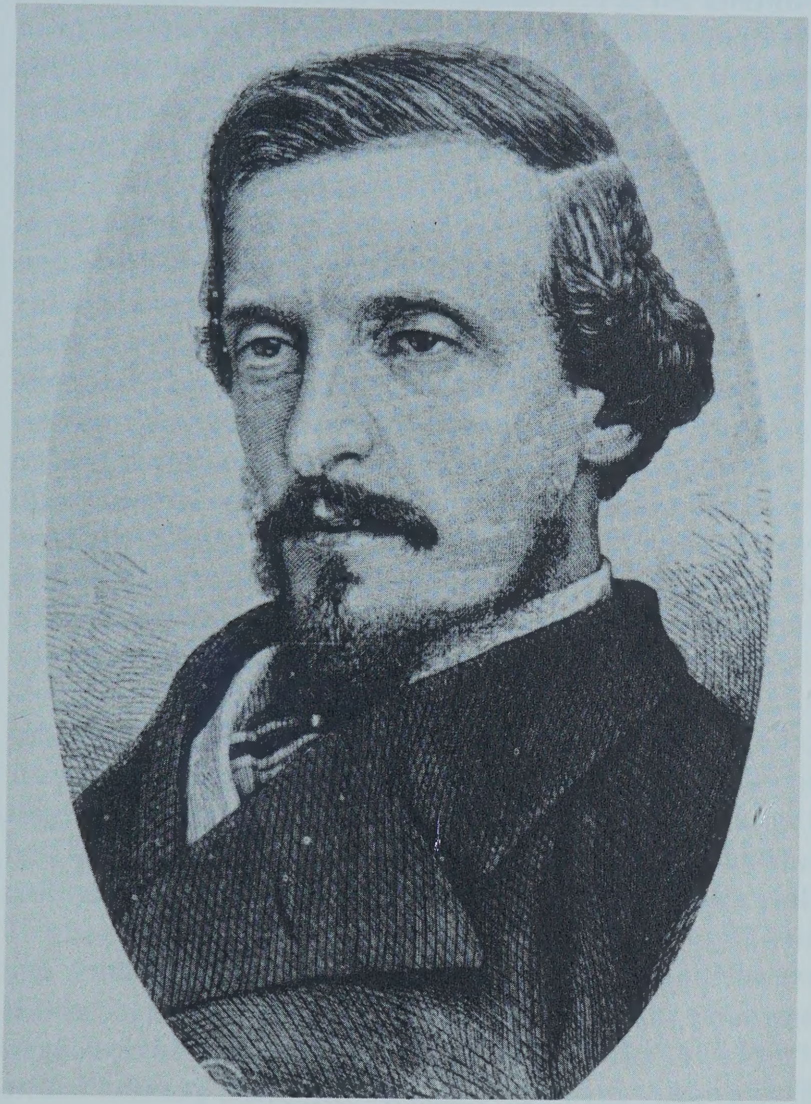
Whatever the objectionable features of Paul as a man or his theology, it was evident from the beginning that he could not expect fair or even objective coverage in the pages of *Framfari.* Even by the fifth issue, December 10, 1877, Jóhann Briem asserted that many of the colonists considered Paul to have made sport of them by allowing so long a time to elapse between his promise to come to the colony and his actual arrival. In the same article he maintained that the Norwegian Synod had a poor reputation among Icelanders in the United States. In a long letter to *Framfari,* published in the issues of January 24th, February 12th and February 20th, 1878, Paul took issue with the unfairness of Jóhann Briem's statement. He called attention to the prevailing circumstances when he had made his offer and the fact that because of his commitment to congregations in Wisconsin he had to await a formal call from the New Iceland families who desired his pastoral services on a part-time basis. He also upheld the motives of the Norwegian Synod in offering his services to the Icelandic colony and refuted the accusations made by detractors of the Synod. Each instalment of Paul's letter was followed by a commentary by Halldór Briem who, in the meantime, had assumed editorship of *Framfari.* In the first of these Briem distorted Paul's meaning beyond recognition by misunderstanding or pretending to misunderstand his use of irony as a literary device, then alleging that he had accused Hallgrímur Pjetursson, the hymnologist, of being "narrow minded." The commentaries on each instalment of Paul's letters were longer than the instalments themselves. In the editor's third commentary he made the extraordinary allegation that membership in the Norwegian Synod had held back the economic development of Norwegians in the United States.

Despite the many objections of the leaders in New Iceland, and their open criticism of Paul, Th. Th. Thorsteinsson did not share their views. We look now at his analysis of Paul as a minister of the gospel. He writes:

> Because Rev. Paul resided in New Iceland only during the winter months and because he only served three parishes which were not far apart, while Rev. Jón served five parishes—it seems, at first glance, the latter bore the heavier load. Yet it was Paul's nature to work tirelessly when faced with the many demands of the people. It was his mission and his divine duty to aid and guide all about him who stand in need. No western Icelander showed such unselfishness on behalf of others during his ten years in America—even if one can, like *Framfari,* dispute his manner of proceeding. It is always possible to point a finger at someone's conduct, and twist it into something worse.[5]

Paul's constant travels on foot the length and breadth of the colony, the practical knowledge of rural economy and land values he had acquired in the United States, and his keen, analytic mind placed him in a more advantageous position than most of his contemporaries at New Iceland to make a realistic appraisal of the colony's potential development. He did not see the future as promising.

However, several encouraging events helped raise the spirits of the



Lord Dufferin (1826-1902), Governor General of Canada, 1872-1878. His *Letters from High Latitudes*, an account of a voyage to Iceland, was published in 1857. He visited New Iceland in September 1877, and was so impressed by the quality of the people that he became their lifelong friend and advocate. What impressed him most was the fact that even in the poorest homes he found shelves containing thirty or forty books. Photograph: Provincial Archives of Manitoba: Lord Dufferin, Governor General of Canada.

New Iceland colonists. First, the lifting of the quarantine in July 1877; next, the arrival that month of a herd of 230 cows purchased from Minnesota, representing a portion of the government loan; third, the appearance of the first issue of *Framfari* on September 10; and, finally, the never-to-be-forgotten visit of the Governor General of Canada, Lord Dufferin, to Gimli on September 14th, whose warm praise of the achievements of the Icelandic colonists was a ray of sunshine for them. No doubt, all these events created in the minds of the colony's leaders a temporary state of euphoria, a state that, in reality, was in many respects illusory.

It is not an overstatement to say that life at this time was extremely hard, insecure and unrewarding. Many of the farms were at a considerable distance from the hay lands. Even if horses and oxen had been available, they could not have been used to transport the hay except in winter because of the mud. Throughout the summer of 1877 the level of Lake Winnipeg was high. Will Kristjanson says, "Northerly winds frequently drove the water onto the meadows along the lake shore, the best hay land in the colony. Crops on low ground suffered from the wet."[6]

Because the colonists still had not learned—in their splendid isolation there was no one to teach them—the technique of fishing through the ice successfully, the winter fishing season which began in December was a failure. "At the end of the month those who had done best in home waters had caught less than a hundred fish, very few of these whitefish."[7]

That same month the last of the supplies purchased with the government loan were distributed, and in future the colonists would have to be on their own. John Taylor is reported to have said as early as November, "The people must have fish or they will perish."[8] The meagre snowfall made transportation between the colony and Winnipeg more difficult than usual for that time of year, and by the time the December fishing had failed, some families had already used up all the provisions they had on hand.

Meanwhile, another infectious disease—scarlet fever—had been transmitted to the colony. In December 1877 Paul Thorlaksson conducted eight funeral services, all for children under the age of fifteen. In the absence of trained medical personnel and the lack of reliable records as to cause of death, one can only assume that most of the deaths resulted from the epidemic, but malnutrition, which left victims deprived of any powers of resistance, must have been a complicating factor. A few weeks after the end of the Christmas season Paul himself suffered a debilitating attack of the infection, after which his general health began to deteriorate. If we take into consideration the pace he set for himself, the conditions of travel and the poor quality of the food he ate, it is not at all surprising that his health began to decline. In spite of that, there is no evidence that he began slowing down, nor that he ever shirked his duties.

Kristjanson says, "The colony council met on December 28th and made a survey of the food situation. This indicated that 116 families had sufficient supplies, 116 families had barely enough, and that twenty-three families were destitute."[9] The members of the colony council were unhappy, to be sure, over the situation that had developed, but there had been, after all, famine years in Iceland. A high mortality rate was no novelty to Icelanders: the poorest of them had always been constrained to tighten their belts.

Fridjón Fridriksson appears to have had no compassion for those colonists who found themselves in difficulties. In letters to the Reverend Jón Bjarnason, he accused the women of ignorance, superstition, slovenliness and filth. Despite the fact that many of the men were debilitated by malnutrition and illness, Fridjón characterized them as being merely feckless.

The desperate situation that faced the colony in December 1877 was eventually resolved. Indians visiting there told the colonists of good fishing grounds farther north. As Kristjanson tells the story, "About the middle of December a party proceeded north, their hand-sleds loaded with nets, provisions, and stones for sinkers. They located excellent whitefish grounds off Little Grindstone Point, some twenty miles north of Icelandic River. The party caught 500 to 600 whitefish in about ten days, and returned to Gimli with the good news on Christmas Day."[10]

Those fishermen took a daring risk. None of them had the winter clothing for survival in temperatures of thirty to forty degrees below zero Fahrenheit, which can grip the region along Lake Winnipeg without warning any time after mid-November. Had that winter of 1877-1878 not been exceptionally mild, it is possible the colony might have sustained the catastrophic loss of some of its most intrepid men.

By the time Paul had been in the settlement a little over two months, he had seen ample evidence of its precarious state. He made up his mind that its immediate future was not only bleak but, worse still, threatening. Sigtryggur and the other leaders appeared to be quite content to let fate run its course, regardless of the frightful conditions which prevailed.

It was at this time that Paul committed the unforgivable sin as far as the New Iceland council was concerned. He persuaded some of his parishioners to write a letter of appeal to Dr. H.A. Preus, the President of the Norwegian Synod. In translation it reads as follows:

> As you are aware, statistical reports recently compiled on the economy of our colony indicate that only very few fathers of the approximately 120 families in your Icelandic congregations can be presumed to be in a position to support their families this winter. At this time many do not know where to turn. The colony council was consequently summoned at Gimli the 28th of last month to determine, if possible, some means of averting our impending affliction, but the council members were unfortunately unable to give us any feasible advice. It was recommended, to be sure, that despite the severe winter cold, as many men as possible should make a long trek north along Lake Winnipeg to try to fish through the ice, and that the women should walk to the settlements in Manitoba, a distance of some 30 to 80 miles, to seek employment. Although a few individuals were able to profit from such advice, most were not; some on account of sickness and family circumstances, others principally because they lacked warm clothing. Our food shortage is largely the result of the failure of the harvest and of fishing, along with the circumstance that our cows are giving little or no milk. Since we can expect no further grant or loan from the government, we understandably feel ourselves threatened by starvation and even death if no one will help us.
>
> Your Icelandic congregations have therefore charged us, the undersigned, with the responsibility of urging you, our esteemed brother in Christ, to turn to our Norwegian kinsmen and brothers in the faith, who have to so great an extent manifested their good will and love for us, and ask them to help us. In our precarious circumstances, weighed down by poverty and need, we deem it justifiable to seek in this manner the Lord's help. On behalf of your congregations:
>
> B. Bjarnason Gísli Jónsson
> Jón Jónasson S. Bjarnason
> Jón Bergmann Th. Bjarnason
> J.P. Hallsson Vigfús Sigurdsson

On January 11 Paul forwarded this appeal to Dr. Preus along with a letter of his own in which he stated, in part:

> It is hardly necessary for me to elaborate on the destitution described in the appeal to render it more vivid to all who question its extent. It would, perhaps, not be out of line for me to add that in many places people are now eating the potatoes which had been set aside for planting in the spring. . . . I hear it rumoured that some people plan to slaughter their only cow and some, it may be, in desperation have already had recourse to this measure.

Paul's worst fears were not realized, but not because of the foresight or decisive and resolute action from the government agents and colony council. The major factor was the weather. It continued mild and there was good fishing off Little Grindstone Point. None of the cows was slaughtered, but a good many colonists were restricted to an exclusive diet of fish for months on end. Because of insufficient fodder the cows gave little or no milk, and that which they did give was unpalatable because of the preponderance of dried fish heads in their diet.

In the meantime the response to the appeal for help exceeded all expectations. Together with Paul's letter and one from Dr. Preus, it was published in the official organ of the Synod and also in the Minneapolis Norwegian paper *Budstikken.* Dr. Preus suggested that if the funds collected the previous summer for the relief of Norwegian farmers in Minnesota, whose crops had been destroyed by grasshoppers, were not depleted, a portion of them be used immediately to relieve the distress of the Icelanders. The result was that $1300, a very considerable sum in those days, was contributed by the Norwegian farmers in the United States for the relief of the families facing destitution at New Iceland.

Reaction in the colony by opponents to Paul was both swift and bitter. The "begging letter," as it was termed in *Framfari,* had served to embarrass some of the most influential men in the colony by calling attention to their failure to cope with emergencies and their proclivity for rushing into action with little or no thought of the possible consequences.

Sigtryggur Jónasson was incensed by the letter. Now his dislike of Paul hardened to contempt. From their first meeting several years before it was apparent they would never be able to see eye-to-eye. Sigtryggur was a man fired by ambition. Years later he would become the first Icelander to be elected as a member of a provincial legislature. Such men invariably want their own way, and seize any opportunity to gain an edge. They also generally heap scorn and ridicule on any who have the courage to oppose them. Rev. Paul had that courage and he was as determined to defend his cause as were his rivals to oppose him.

Rev. Paul was also a people's man, one who was strongly aware of Christian principles and the necessity of upholding and practising them. We have seen examples of his deep compassion and his care for his charges. Perhaps Sigtryggur could have been content to treat him as a manageable rival and little more than an annoyance. However, when Paul entered the political arena, and took it upon himself to encourage settlers to move out of what Sigtryggur believed to be his domain, Sigtryggur declared war.

From this point on Paul's position in the colony of New Iceland became less and less secure. Sigtryggur and his supporters began a campaign to rid themselves of this "meddlesome" man. As far as they were concerned he had brought shame to the Icelandic name.

What was even more galling for Sigtryggur was that his judgement had been called into question. He was not a man who could admit graciously he had made an error in leading his countrymen to this inhospitable site. But the fact was there. He and John Taylor had made the decision. Both men had been members of the exploring party. Both had to accept the responsibility.

To consolidate his position as leader of the settlement, Sigtryggur gathered men around him who were of the same mind. They were formidable men and made all the important decisions of the colony. John Taylor was appointed by the Dominion government to the position of Icelandic Agent, to represent the colony in an official capacity; Sigtryggur was engaged by the government in a local capacity, agent in the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, and Assistant Icelandic Agent in charge of administrating the government loans to the settlers; Fridjón Fridriksson owned the store which distributed supplies acquired by the loans. Jóhann Briem (he was Sigtryggur's brother-in-law), Fridjón Fridriksson and Sigtryggur were the directors of the newspaper *Framfari* and dictated its policy; and the editor, Halldór Briem, was a cousin to Jóhann. In a small settlement such as New Iceland there were few who dared to oppose them. Not only did they have power but they were also financially better off than most of their fellow settlers.

In the light of Paul's life and character, and the historical records, it is safe to state that his "begging letter" was not a devious attempt on his part to destroy the settlement, as some have claimed. Besides being a scholar and an idealist, Paul had a practical streak in his nature which is rare for men of that kind. When the occasion demanded, he could be not only coolly reasonable, but also as decisive and inflexible as a general in a campaign. He was not simply a dreamer, nor one who would shilly-shally when the world was crashing down on all sides. Whenever he saw a threat to his people he felt it was his duty to work out a plan to mitigate it and then, with a rare clarity of vision, he acted on that plan. In the fall of 1877 the threat to the settlers' survival in New Iceland was real. Only because of this did he take it upon himself to write the Synod for assistance. He was not one to be deterred by the threat of strong opposition.

Paul had by this time gained a following of 120 families in New Iceland, almost one half of the settlers. The other 140 families were followers of Rev. Jón Bjarnason. In large measure this latter group had the support of the influential leaders. It was an affront to Sigtryggur when he learned Paul was offering his people a chance to leave New Iceland to start a new life in Pembina, in the U.S.A.

In order to understand Sigtryggur's violent reactions we must peer beneath the surface. If we do not, we see Sigtryggur merely as a revengeful "poor loser." Besides his obvious self-importance there were two other important characteristics in his psyche which must be taken into account.

Sigtryggur was not a scholar by nature but he certainly was a learned man. His articles in *Framfari* bear witness to this. In his earlier years he had studied the workings of politics and governments, and he had reached the conclusion that the British form of government was superior to that of the United States. By extension it seems he also assumed that those who followed the former were somewhat superior. Now Rev. Paul was going to take almost half his settlers to the United States! Sigtryggur must have sincerely believed that they deserved better. They should remain in a British state!

The second characteristic is in a way related to the first. It concerns his idea of what it meant to be an Icelander—a true Icelander. It is worthwhile turning to Sigtryggur's own words on this subject as they appear in *Framfari* in an article headed "Are the Icelanders Born to Everlasting Hunger and Suffering?" The first part deals with the 900-year history of the nation, and it traces the sequence of tragedies and ensuing hardships.

> So far as we can see, the history of Iceland has been nothing but a history of hunger and misery. The hunger was the result of particularly cruel and snowy winters, pack-ice, cold springs, cold and wet summers, poor trade, poor government, shortage of fish, the fall of volcanic ash and the misery to which they give rise. Additional suffering was caused by domestic disputes and contention, storms that resulted in loss of life, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, avalanches, landslides and particularly by frightful epidemics (black death and smallpox) which have frequently devastated the country.

He goes on to say how suffering and hardship can be "necessary and good," for that "sharpens and hardens" the people. Then he turns to the new world and the settlers about him. He tells them how to prove themselves as worthy Icelanders, as citizens who are "not to be governed by the notion that they need do nothing to make a living here, that the inhabitants of this land [Canada] will feed and clothe them as though they were parish paupers."

Now he challenges the settlers' manhood and pride. His logic is cold and precise but his major premise is weak: "Therefore if the Icelanders die from starvation here it is either because they are not so capable as all the other peoples who have settled here to preserve their own lives, or they are born to everlasting hunger and misery."

As he continues he attacks Paul and his followers for failing to show the "true Icelandic spirit." He asks, "But what are the prerequisites if the Icelanders are to improve their position in this country? Unfortunately there are many who do not appear to have them."

He then defends borrowing money but not accepting gifts, because gifts would reduce those who accepted them to "spiritual paupers" and "common beggars."

> Some people might think that none of this pertains to us, so we shall therefore cite instances. Those who first went to Ontario received assistance from the government which did not have to be repaid. A businessman let them have a number of necessities on credit for which they never paid. Then Paul Thorlaksson collected gifts for them among the Synod men of the United States: they were also assisted with community funds. Then they were moved free from Ontario to New Iceland, where for two years they were extended a loan; and some of those same people are now in the forefront of begging money from the Synod on the basis of lies. In our opinion they would never have become public beggars if Paul Thorlaksson had not encouraged them in that respect. Paul already enjoys many

> benefits from the Synod and thinks it is no disgrace to accept all he can—free.

After this devastating attack on Paul, Sigtryggur concludes:

> We would remind Pastor Paul that by encouraging in people the ideas and spirits of parish paupers he is turning the members into his own paupers and those of the Synod and that to beg before necessity demands it will have the consequence that if ever Icelanders must really rely on outside help there will be no one who will believe them.[11]

The theme of this article is certainly not humane or compassionate. It is coldly philosophical, and if this sounds like a cruel analysis perhaps the words of W.J. Lindal can serve as a somewhat mitigating factor.

> It has been said that without the Atlantic Ocean, and without the adversities through the centuries, due to the climate and other impending factors, the real Iceland of today might not have been! If so, it is equally possible, as the same natural laws apply, that, if an inhospitable area had not been selected, and if the first landing had not been at an hour of approaching winter, and particularly if the smallpox epidemic had not exacted its toll, that small group of Icelanders of the first three years in New Iceland might not have provided a pattern which so clearly showed the Icelandic mind at its best.

Lindal also refers to the smallpox epidemic:

> But the settlers bore their burdens so heroically, so well, indeed, that the medical officers reported that the people were cold and apathetic to the sick. Sigtryggur Jonasson properly took them to task for misunderstanding the Icelanders. The stoic calm was not based on indifference. For centuries their forefathers had suffered calamities of frost and fire, earthquakes and plagues with frightful losses of life. Stoicism and the ability to endure had become the very warp and wool of the Icelandic character.[12]

This nationalist pride goes a long way to explain Sigtryggur's feelings on this matter.

A Lutheran minister familiar with the story of Icelanders in America made the following discerning comment, which nicely summarizes the subject: "To me it is evident that the real issue was not theological—

but a conflict between unsightful, arrogant, almost racist nationalism on the one hand, and Paul's pragmatic concern for the survival and well-being of the impoverished immigrants from Iceland."[13]

Rev. Jón Bjarnason, at one time Paul's good friend, took the side of Sigtryggur's faction. The two ministers were very different in their attitude to the suffering of those around them. In this respect Paul was impetuous. He saw nothing to be gained from suffering and hardship, and exerted all his energies and influence to prevent them wherever possible. His activities on behalf of his countrymen from the time of his arrival in North America provide ample proof of this attitude, and this stance brought him into conflict with the most influential men at New Iceland. Ironically, he could be termed a humanist who was also a passionate fundamentalist!

Jón Bjarnason, on the other hand, seems to have taken a philosophic attitude towards the sufferings and hardships his fellow countrymen were undergoing on the American continent. Although he and his wife had spent four years in the United States before moving to New Iceland in November 1877, they had not lived in an Icelandic community during that time. Unlike Paul, who endeavoured to avert or alleviate hardship, Jón appears to have accepted it as an immutable fact of life and an element that tended to confirm the religious fervour of Icelanders. In his invocation on the occasion of the observance of Iceland's Millennial in Milwaukee on August 2, 1874, for instance, he prayed: "We thank thee Lord, as well, for the suffering and tribulation which have visited our country ever since Thou in Thy eternal wisdom first gave it to our forefathers to dwell in."

In the eyes of Sigtryggur Jónasson, Paul was a "dangerous revolutionary." In truth he was more accurately an eloquent advocate of the less fortunately situated members of the Icelandic community. Jón, however, remained the favourite with the colony leaders. He posed no threat to them.

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1. Nowhere is the fallaciousness of Fridjón Fridriksson's opinions demonstrated more sharply than with the words: "The bellwether of the [Norwegian] Synod." Björn Pjetursson actually declined to become a member of the congregations Paul Thorlaksson established under that Synod's auspices in North Dakota and, moreover, eventually became the first Icelander to be ordained into the ministry of the Unitarian Church in North America.

2. Th. Th. Thorsteinsson, *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi*, III, p. 96 f., 118.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
6. Will Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba: A Manitoba Saga,* p. 69.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
8. Thorleifur Jackson, *Frá austri til vesturs,* p. 83. Also cited by W. Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba,* p. 80.
9. Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba,* p. 80.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Framfari*, April 5, 1878.
12. W.J. Lindal, *The Icelanders in Canada,* p. 133.
13. Jón Bjarnason, *Rit og Raedur,* p. 205 f.

XIII

THEOLOGICAL DEBATE

IN MARCH 1878 the three congregations Paul established in New Iceland—Vídalín in the Willow Point District, Gudbrand and Hallgrím in the Arnes District—were formally organized into a body known as "The Icelandic Lutheran Congregations in New Iceland." The five congregations served by the Reverend Jón Bjarnason constituted an organization called "The Association of Icelandic Lutheran Churches in America."[1] The constitutions of these two church bodies were printed side by side in *Framfari* on March 19, 1878.

Jón's followers subscribed to ten by-laws, Paul's to twenty. In Jón's churches the right to vote at congregational meetings was extended to all members, including women, over the age of eighteen. In Paul's churches it was restricted to male members over the age of twenty-one.

It is doubtful whether many of the laity could have understood, let alone discussed intelligently, the points of doctrine on which the two constitutions differed. Article 2 of Jón's constitution, for instance, reads in English translation:

> The association of churches believes the Holy Scripture, that is the Old and New Testament, to be the revealed word of God and the only true and safe rule for men's faith, doctrine and life. The association of churches considers itself Lutheran because it regards the doctrine of justification by faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3 & 4), which Luther and his associates emphasized in their struggle for the reformation of the church, a fundamental tenet of the Christian religion. We hold in high esteem the creeds of the Lutheran Church as evidence of the ways the theologians of that church to which our people have belonged for three hundred years have interpreted the teachings of

> Holy Scripture and protected themselves against heresy. But neither the Lutheran creed nor any other confession of faith do we esteem as highly as Holy Scripture, which is the standard for the validity of all Christian doctrine.

The corresponding portions of Paul's constitution read as follows:

> Article 3.
> The congregation acknowledges Holy Scripture, i.e. the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments, to be the revealed word of God and the only true source, rule and guide for our faith, doctrine and conduct.
>
> Article 4.
> The congregation accepts the teachings of Holy Scripture in accordance with the confessions of faith of the Lutheran Church in Iceland. It acknowledges these confessions of faith not only as witness of what the church has taught at various times, but rather as the pure and correct exposition of God's word, which is immutable. These confessions of faith are: 1) the Apostles' Creed; 2) the Nicene Creed; 3) the Athanasian Creed; 4) the Augsburg Confession, unaltered; 5) Luther's Little Catechism. We accept these creeds of our church as a precious treasure, inherited from our forefathers as testimony of their virtue and the fruit of suffering and of their battle in the service of the Lord and His church; as a safeguard which protected them, as it did the true and visible church of God here on earth, against heresies in Christianity; which they struggled to preserve for us, their heirs; and which we, despite the progress and increase of knowledge since their time, find no reason to discard, but on the other hand to hold to firmly (cf. II Tim. 1, 12; 3, 14) and pray for God's grace that they may serve to glorify His name, be for us the criterion, should factional disputes arise in the church, and the guidepost in our judgments of teachers and doctrines, and that they may bear witness and set an example for our descendants.

Here Paul would appear to have laid himself open to justifiable criticism from his most vehement antagonist and former recipient of his help, Halldór Briem, editor of *Framfari,* who lost no time in pointing out that neither the Nicene nor Athanasian Creeds had ever been published in an Icelandic translation.

Of more immediacy to the Lutherans of New Iceland than the relative importance attached to the creeds was the difference of opinion expressed by Jón and Paul on the value of ritual and traditional observances. Jón Bjarnason had been favourably impressed by the simplicity of the worship services of the Congregationalists and Presbyterians he had attended in the United States. To his mind, this simplicity reflected a far greater degree of devotional sincerity than did the formal ritual of the State Church of Iceland. Paul, on the other hand, had an abiding love and respect for the Lutheran ritual. To him it was not a reflection of form without substance, but a supremely beautiful expression of worship with roots deep in the traditions of his people.

Hence Article 3 of Jón's constitution reads as follows: "With respect to the order of service, each affiliated congregation is entirely free to employ the form it finds most appropriate. The only consideration in this respect should be the spiritual enrichment of the Christian community."

The corresponding article of Paul's constitution, Article 5, states: "In matters of ritual, festivals and other usages, insofar as the different conditions of the church in this country permit, the congregation desires to follow the customs established in Iceland and generally followed there at this time, or, where necessary, to make minor alterations in them."

Membership in Jón's congregations was contingent upon each individual's searching his own conscience: "Since it is God's prerogative, and not that of men, to look into hearts, everyone may be considered a member of the association [of churches] who gives his assent to this constitution by affixing his signature to it and lives in accordance with it."

On the basis of the following article in Paul's constitution, however, Article 8, the Bjarnason faction accused him of dictatorship:

> Those desiring to become members of the congregation shall present themselves before its pastor, who shall investigate whether they meet the requirements the congregation exacts of its members, as set forth in Article 7 and, if such be the case, he shall announce the fact at the next service or congregational meeting so that a decision may be reached at the following meeting or service, in accordance with the provisions of Article 7, whether or not they should be admitted to membership in the congregation.

For some people at least, Paul's adherence to the traditional form of service they had known in Iceland—the use of vestments and the chanting of the collects and benediction—constituted a nostalgic tie with the past, a time of hardship for most of them but nevertheless one of treasured memories as well.

Paul's followers were attracted by his sincerity, the simple dignity of his preaching, his compassion and his totally unselfish efforts to help others in their difficulties. He was deeply concerned with their physical as well as spiritual welfare, and he rejected the notion that suffering and hardship were their allotted portion in life.

The assumption made by several scholars of the religious scene in New Iceland, that it was these characteristics and not Paul's doctrinal position that drew people to him, seems to be correct. The more esoteric points of Lutheran doctrine on which Paul and Jón disagreed probably would never have been of the slightest concern to men and women whose education had been limited to home instruction in reading, writing and the elements of arithmetic, and whose formal training in the principles of religion had been restricted to the catechetical instruction they had received at the age of fourteen or fifteen, had they not been subjected to a barrage of anti-Paul propaganda. And, Paul's espousal of the exclusivity dogma common to both the Missouri and Norwegian Synods—from the beginning he objected to having his followers and those of the opposition share the same burial ground —served only to lend weight to attacks on him and his position, in terms ordinary people could easily understand.

In spite of their different views, both men were admired by the settlers for their keen intelligence and eloquence. According to his nephew, the late Reverend Rúnólfur Marteinsson, Jón preferred to read his sermons whenever circumstances permitted.[2] His prose was polished and elegant. To judge from Paul Thorlaksson's papers, on the other hand, he appears generally to have preached more informal sermons, using only notes. Jón impressed his listeners by his reasoned eloquence, Paul by his simplicity and strong convictions.

In the outlying areas of New Iceland services were held in the homes of members, but in the village of Gimli both pastors held services in a warehouse which could accommodate about 300 worshippers. In Gimli, therefore, it was possible for people whose minds were not entirely closed to outside influence to attend the services of both pastors and compare the form of service as well as the nature of the message. In the absence of any form of public entertainment, this was a more appealing pastime then than it would be considered today.

Intense partisanship is an integral aspect of the Icelandic character. At that time these newcomers to the District of Keewatin could not have had any intense interest in federal politics and they were not yet involved in provincial politics. Rivalry among hockey teams had not yet begun. Religious rivalry and even acrimonious religious disputes were not associated with morbidity, as they would be today. In a remote community with neither sports nor politics to argue over, religion provided a lively outlet for the expression of diverse opinions.

During this era members of both Jón's and Paul's congregations were honestly confused about the doctrinal issues to which so much space was devoted in *Framfari.* Consequently, a good deal of dissension was created between the "John's men" and the "Paul's men"[3] who, ironically, had all been baptized and confirmed in the same church. Hence, in January 1878, some of the members of Jón Bjarnason's congregation at Gimli organized a Wednesday discussion group in the hope of clarifying at least some of the matters which puzzled them. In this group they were joined by members of Paul's congregation as well. Women had the same privilege as men to pose questions and express opinions. The use of vestments and ritual as well as the organization of the early church were among the topics discussed.[4]

The parishioners asked their two pastors to explain their differences at an open meeting. They must have been honestly seeking enlightenment, not trying to exacerbate controversy. The misunderstanding of these differences had led to acrimony and dissension within the colony. Now the people hoped a deeper understanding might lead the followers of both pastors to the realization that, as Lutherans, they had more in common than they had to wrangle over.

Up to this point the two pastors appear to have scrupulously avoided making public attacks on each other's integrity. It was, therefore, possible for each of them to debate disputed theological issues in public without rancour. The situation was nevertheless delicate and one which demanded the utmost tact and careful preparation if the meeting were to achieve the desired end. The pastors promised their co-operation, but the committee of leading citizens entrusted with planning the meeting did not even formulate a tentative agenda for their consideration. In fact, there appear to have been no consultations whatever at which both pastors were present.

The late Reverend Rúnólfur Marteinsson, who not only perused the written minutes but also heard the verbal account of the meeting from his uncle, the Reverend Jón Bjarnason, related that the meeting consisted of little more than disorganized conversation.

Sigtryggur Jónasson was the first to speak. He explained the ostensible purpose of the meeting and presided over the election of a chairman. After Fridjón Fridriksson was chosen to fill that post, two clerks were appointed, Palmi Hjálmarsson from Paul's side and Sigtryggur Jónasson from Jón's. About 300 people are said to have attended the first day's deliberations, somewhat fewer the following day.

The preliminaries out of the way, there arose an embarrassing situation which could easily have been avoided by intelligent planning by the organizers of the meeting. It was suggested that the proceedings be opened with a prayer. Paul, however, announced that his conscience would not permit him to join in prayer with the other group in the absence of any agreement between them. According to some sources, Paul declined to join in prayer with Jón Bjarnason—he could "no longer consider him a brother in Christ" because of the heresies he taught. In view, however, of the calumny to which Paul had been subjected in *Framfari* by the influential members of the Bjarnason faction, one is inclined to wonder whether on this occasion forthright honesty was not more praiseworthy than a false pretension that there was actually a state of mutual respect and concord. Paul proposed, as an alternative, that the meeting be opened with the singing of a hymn.

Rev. Harald Sigmar, a grand-nephew of Rev. Paul, offers an explanation which is not only more fair but more reasonable:

> Paul's refusal to engage in public prayer with the other group was most likely rooted in the Missouri Lutheran principle of not praying with those where there is not total doctrinal agreement. To me this demonstrates (along with the graveyard issue) Paul's strong indoctrination by the Missouri Synod in points like those which were utterly alien to the experience and spirit of Icelandic Lutheranism in all of its historical stages. . . . Paul was fundamentally very forgiving —but caught in an untenable principle.

In view of what Paul Thorlaksson considered unjust accusations made against the Norwegian Synod in the editorial and letters columns of *Framfari,* he proposed that first priority be given to discussion of the motives and doctrinal position of that Synod. Jón Bjarnason maintained it would be to greater advantage to discuss the origins and authority of the essential elements of Christian belief, including infant baptism and tenets of the Lutheran Church in Iceland. Paul acceded to Jón's suggestion, but the only point on which agreement was reached was the necessity for infant baptism.

The next subject discussed was the inspiration of the scriptures. Paul expressed his conviction and that of the Norwegian Synod that every word of scripture was directly inspired by the Holy Spirit. Jón maintained that divine inspiration was limited to the essentials required for man's salvation, but that otherwise the Bible contained human error and some contradictions as well.

Then the conversation turned to the Lutheran church. Paul clarified the view of the Norwegian Synod that the Lutheran church was "the only true, correct and visible church of God on earth." The Synod holds, he maintained, that the Lutheran church alone teaches purity of doctrine, and that all other churches depart more or less from the right path. It is for this reason, he explained, that the Lutheran church condemned the teachings of others, but at the same time made no pretence to perfection in itself.

While Lutherans believe that salvation is possible for individual Catholics and members of the reformed churches, Paul continued, the Norwegian Synod does not admit the possibility that any doctrine could be purer than its own.

Jón, on the other hand, maintained that all religious bodies which preached salvation through the gospel and incarnation of Jesus Christ could properly be called Christ's churches, and that no denomination was without flaw. He restated his belief in the one, true and holy universal church of Christ.

Paul contended that Christ was physically present in the sacrament of the altar, Jón that Christ's presence was spiritual only.

According to the joint report prepared by the two clerks and subsequently published in *Framfari,* on the second day there was some discussion of the creeds and the points on which Paul and Halldór Briem had previously argued in *Framfari.* The report does not, however, go into detail in this respect, and the final portion of the actual minutes is missing.

It would appear that there was increased participation from the laity on the second day of the meeting. Some are said to have expressed their views with considerable warmth.[5]

In Will Kristjanson's words, "The discussions showed clearly that the two ministers differed radically in their religious views." He continued: "Despite this it appeared that the members of the two factions departed with a friendly feeling, and with a much better understanding of the differences between the two pastors and between Christian sects. It was especially apparent that the people were of one accord that while each person held to his own point of view in religious matters, this should not mar public concord and brotherly co-operation in promoting the welfare of the colony."[6]

Less than three weeks later, however, in *Framfari* (May 3, 1878) there was a long news letter by the Reverend Jón Bjarnason, printed ostensibly for the edification of readers in Iceland. Here he reiterated the accusations made by Halldór Briem against Paul Thorlaksson in March with regard to the "begging letter," and charged him with exaggeration and "departure from the truth" in some respects in his letter to Dr. H.A. Preus. In the same letter Jón Bjarnason insinuated that both Paul and the Norwegian Synod had dishonourable intentions towards the people in New Iceland. He stated that he had nothing against the presence of the Synod in the colony, provided that the organization and its representatives worked in an honourable way. "It is of the most importance," he continued, "that those who preach the gospel employ no means other than God's word to entice people into their flock."

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1. These five congregations were: Stone Church Congregation in Willow Point District; Town Congregation at Gimli; Breiduvik Congregation in the northern part of the colony; Fraternal Congregation at Icelandic River; and Big Island Congregation.

2. Rúnólfur Marteinsson, *Aevisaga séra Jóns Bjarnasonar*, p. 117.

3. The two groups were referred to as "John's men" and "Paul's men" at this time (Jónsmenn, and Pálsmenn).

4. Th. Th. Thorsteinsson, *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi*, III, p. 102.

5. Marteinsson, *Aevisaga séra Jóns Bjarnasonar*, p. 80 ff.

6. Will Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba: A Manitoba Saga*, p. 95 f.

XIV

A COMMUNITY SPLIT

AFTER THE WINTER of 1877-1878 many began to lose faith that their circumstances would improve in the near future. Meetings were held late that winter in the Arnes district to discuss ways and means of improving conditions and many suggestions were made, but they all reached the same conclusion: there was no way of improving conditions, for they had neither fish nor cattle to sell and there was no market for wood. So the conclusion was, although many did not like it, that they must move away.[1]

The thick mud inland, where there was no natural drainage for the low-lying land, the distance from market, the high rate of infant mortality, the swarms of gadflies (''bulldogs'') that tormented the cows and curtailed their yield of milk, and the voracity of the mosquitoes—all these elements reinforced Paul Thorlaksson's conviction that poor judgement indeed had been shown in choosing the site for an Icelandic colony.

In what appear to be manuscript notes for a lecture, the handwriting of which has been identified as that of Sigtryggur Jónasson, the following passage emphasizes the misery caused by insects: "We here are more or less immune to the bite of the mosquito, but in Iceland they have no mosquitoes, so these newcomers being non-immunized were set upon by these pests with relentless ferocity. I remember men going about with mosquito nets over their faces and wearing woollen mitts on their hands in mid-summer."

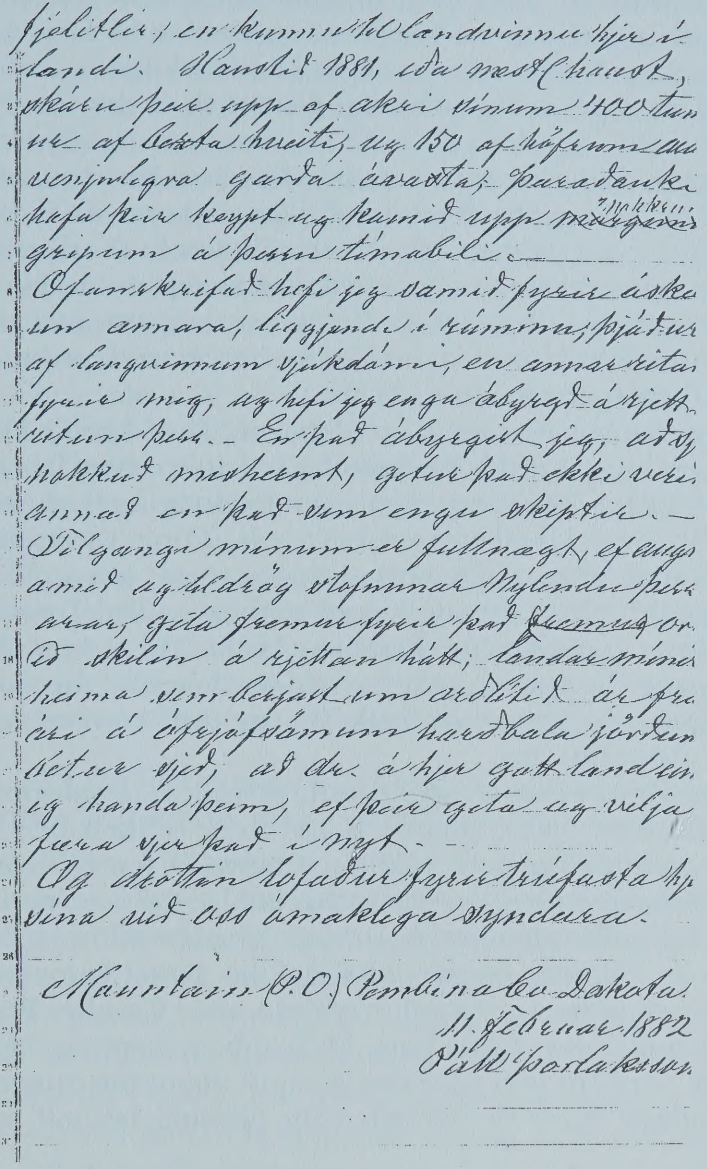
The southernmost part of New Iceland, the Willow Point district, where most of the 1875 colonists had settled, was the best cleared and most populous part of the colony. There was good arable land in the

River Settlement and on Big Island, but most of Paul Thorlaksson's adherents lived in the Arnes district, to the north of the village of Gimli, on the poorest terrain of all. It was their circumstances, rather than those of the more favourably situated colonists, that coloured Paul's views of the colony's potential development. Although there was only a trickle of immigration from Iceland to Canada in 1877, Paul was apprehensive that the immigration agents would entice increasing numbers of unwary Icelanders to the colony, where they would fare no better than the members of his congregation in the Arnes district.

Ever since Rev. Paul's final, disappointing trip to Iceland, his health had begun to deteriorate. Yet evidence clearly shows that he continued doing as much as possible to improve the circumstances of all Icelandic colonists. He feared that without his leadership, there was a strong possibility the colony in North Dakota would end in disaster. In addition to his religious duties, he had a continuous run of practical problems to deal with. There was little time for rest and self-indulgence. For Rev. Paul, during this critical time, a feeling of urgency attended every task. Had his health been sound, the duties would have been less pressing, but as he felt himself gradually growing weaker he resolved to do his utmost to stabilize the colony and lighten the load for his people before it was too late.

In January 1882, aware that he had only a few more weeks to live, Paul dictated to his father an account of his activities between 1878 and 1881.[2] After explaining how he came to visit New Iceland for the first time, Paul continues:

> It was obvious that if the government agents and *Framfari* were to have their way, if matters were permitted to follow their own course and if no attempt were made to find a more promising location to which people from New Iceland and immigrants from Iceland could be directed, increasing numbers of them would have to suffer similar hardships. I therefore determined to seek a more advantageous location that spring, even though there appeared to be little likelihood that many could derive advantage from it on account of their extreme poverty.
>
> A few men decided to accompany me: Jóhann Hallsson with his son Gunnar[3] and Magnús Stefánsson from Gimli.[4] In Winnipeg we were joined by two others, Sigurdur Josúa Björnsson[5] and Árni Thorlaksson.[6] Before leaving Gimli the intention uppermost in our minds was to begin our search for land only after travelling as far as the Icelandic settlement in Lyon County, Minnesota.[7]



fjelitlir; en kunnáttu landvinnu hjer í
landi. Haustið 1881, eða næstl. haust,
skáru þeir upp af akri sínum 400 tun-
nur af besta hveiti, og 150 af höfrum au-
venjulegra garða ávaxta; þaraðauki
hafa þeir keypt og komið upp ~~mörgum~~ nokkrum
gripum á þessu tímabili. ——
Ofanskrifað hefi jeg samið fyrir ásko-
un annara, liggjandi í rúminu, þjáður
af langvinnum sjúkdómi, en annar ritar
fyrir mig, og hefi jeg enga ábyrgð á rjett-
ritun þess. — En það ábyrgist jeg, að sje
nokkuð misheimt, getur það ekki verið
annað en það sem engu skiptir. —
Tilgangi mínum er fullnægt, ef aug-
namið og tildrög stofnunar Nýlendu þess-
arar, geta fremur fyrir það ~~fremur~~ orð-
ið skilin á rjettan hátt; landar mínir
heima sem berjast um arðlítið ár frá
ári á ófrjósömum harðbala jörðum
betur sjeð, að du. á hjer gott landein-
ig handa þeim, ef þeir geta og vilja
færa sjer það í nyt. —
Og drottinn lofaður fyrir trúfasta hy-
sína við oss ómaklega syndara.

Mountain (P.O.) Pembina Co Dakota.
11. Februar 1882
Páll Þorláksson.

The last page (Page Sixteen) from Reverend Paul Thorlaksson's deathbed statement, written for him by his father, Thorlákur Jónsson. Paul died about three weeks later, not quite thirty-three years old.

During our sojourn in Winnipeg, Magnús Stefánsson fell into conversation with a newspaper editor who claimed to be familiar with areas of northern Dakota [Territory] and declared that he could not recommend to us a more promising district than that in the vicinity of the so-called Pembina Hills.[8] This man, who appeared to be genuinely moved by the hardships of the colonists at New Iceland, was desirous of discussing the Pembina district with me. At first I thought he might be a land speculator owning tracts in the district and for that reason was eager to see it settled as soon as possible. I saw no reason to disregard his advice altogether, so my companions and I decided to stop off at Pembina, just south of the border, and continue westward from there to the Pembina Hills.

That would probably have been around the middle of April.[9] The weather was exceptionally mild. We disembarked at Pembina late in the afternoon and put up for the night at a modest lodging house on the river bank. [In those days there were but few buildings there, and even fewer substantial ones.] The next morning we set out on foot west across the prairie along the south bank of the so-called Tongue River, which flows east from the Pembina Hills. There were no houses to be seen on the prairie, only the odd one here and there on the edge of the forest along the river bank. We stopped at several and made inquiries about the area.

Most of the people to whom we spoke could provide little information except about their own homesteads and those of their neighbours, but they were well pleased with their farms. A few of them, however, were of the opinion there was arable land to the west, in the vicinity of the hills. We obtained our most valuable information from a well-to-do German farmer named John Bertel [properly Bechtel],[10] at whose home we stayed overnight, near Cavalier Post Office, 24 miles southwest of Pembina. He had been farming there for the past two years. [At that time this was just about the extreme limit of the Tongue River settlement, with nothing beyond but wilderness.]

We set out from Cavalier the next morning, continuing in the same direction out into the wilderness. Now the forest along the river became increasingly dense and spread out, the terrain more elevated and less fertile. At times we followed the north bank of the river, at others the south, through a deep valley, until we came in sight of the hills. Then all at once the land began to decline. As far as the eye could see, there lay before us to the south and west green plains with belts of woodland. This land impressed us as being what in Iceland we call *sveitalegt*—suitable for farming. Where the terrain began to slope down again we found the same rich soil we had previously seen

> on the grassy plains. After resting here a while we decided to turn back, for it was getting late and we were very tired. At the same time, however, we decided that my companions should investigate more thoroughly this tract which lay before us while I followed my original plan to inspect land elsewhere in Dakota and Minnesota, 300 miles farther south. Even then I began to think we could not select a better site for our settlement than the area here, east of the hills, even though it was still distant from a market town.
>
> Provided the soil throughout the district were as rich as that which we had already seen, the extensive forested tracts constituted yet another point in its favour.
>
> The reader will now have surmised that we had just obtained our first glimpse—albeit from a distance—of the region now known as the Icelandic settlement in Dakota, already the home of more than 600 Icelanders, many of whom own beautiful farms and fine livestock.[11]
>
> We spent the next night at the home of B. Olsen, a Norwegian, whose farm was located in the wooded area southwest of Cavalier. The only settler of that nationality, he had arrived not long before with his wife and children. He treated us as though we were his brothers and bade us welcome to his neighbourhood.[12]

In 1875 the first group of Icelanders had settled in Lyon and Lincoln Counties, Minnesota in the vicinity of what is now the village of Minneota. Paul Thorlaksson visited this community on his way to Shawano in May 1878, conducted two services there and confirmed two children, then stopped there again the following September and conducted a service on the twelfth of that month.

In his pastoral records Paul mentions having conducted only one service at Shawano that summer, a communion service on the fifth Sunday after Trinity. Jón Jónsson reports a debate at Shawano on June 17th between Paul Thorlaksson and an Adventist named Olsen, and in a letter to *Framfari,* published October 5, 1878, Stephán G. Stephánsson related that Paul delivered an address at the Fourth of July celebration in Shawano that summer, in which he exhorted his listeners to thank God for the religious as well as civil liberty they enjoyed in the United States.

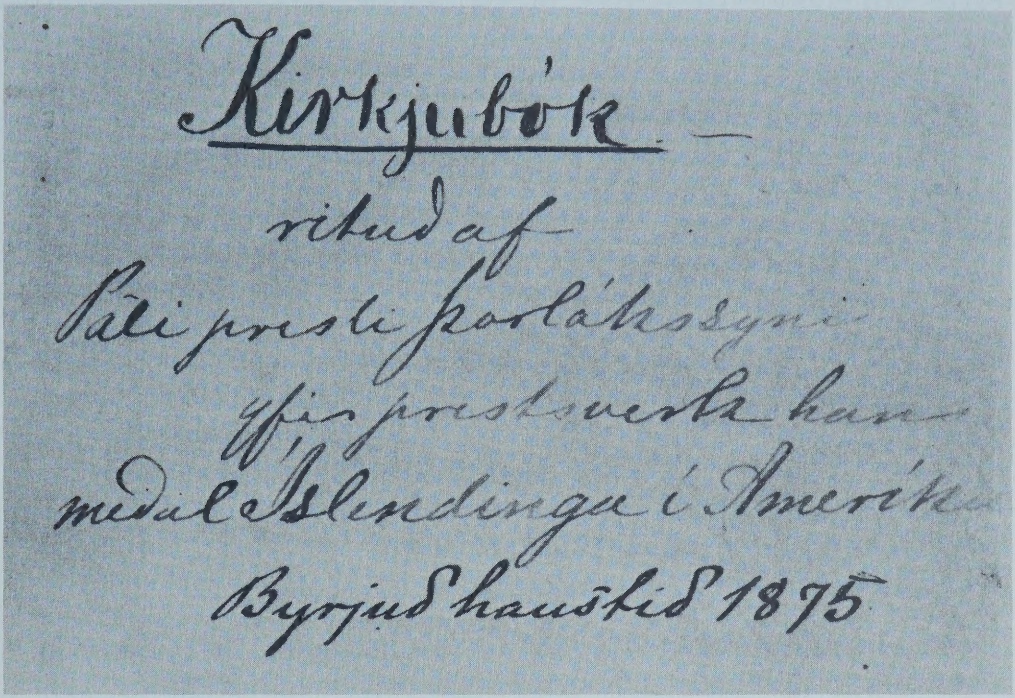
Paul's account resumes:

> Six months later, while returning from Minnesota and Wisconsin to become resident pastor to the congregations which had been organized under my charge the previous winter at New Iceland, I

> detoured to the west to visit my companions in the Pembina Hills. Two of them had homesteaded in the immediate vicinity of Olsen's farm, but Jóhann Hallsson and his son, together with Gísli Egilsson, Jóhann's son-in-law, who had joined them, had settled a short distance to the west of the place we had stopped the previous spring. I gave them a detailed account of my search for land farther south, adding that there was no doubt in my mind that we should choose a site for settlement here in the Pembina district in preference to Minnesota. There were two principal reasons for this decision: first, ease of access for the people of New Iceland, and second, the presence of convenient and extensive tracts of timber. Farther south there were only grassy plains, with no forested tracts at all.
>
> Meanwhile there were several other developments. After we separated the previous spring, it did not take Jóhann Hallsson long to make up his mind to return to New Iceland to fetch his family and possessions. This aroused no little consternation at New Iceland. The government agents ridiculed the idea in the English papers and *Framfari,* spoke of pressure and trickery on my part, and called my followers the most feckless people in New Iceland, parasites who clung to me only for the gifts and assistance they hoped to obtain, and so on, adding that fortunately, so far as they and others could ascertain, there were but few such individuals, and the misbegotten undertaking would soon collapse. They did all in their power to ruin Jóhann. Not only did they strip him of the unused portion of his government loan—which was, moreover, irregular—but also confiscated cattle he had purchased with his own funds.[13] *Framfari* prevailed on two men who had made a quick trip through the Pembina district in the summer to assert that they had found nothing there except land which was uninhabitable or virtually so.[14]

This, of course, was a blatant misinterpretation of the facts.

The summer and autumn of 1878 produced little cause for optimism among the settlers at New Iceland. It is true that Sigurdur Jónsson at the farm Bordeyri on Big Island reaped a truly remarkable harvest of beans, sixty-nine pounds and three ounces, from a seeding of nine ounces. Elsewhere, however, much of the vegetable crop was destroyed by cutworms. A few men in the Willow Point district had tried their hand at raising sheep, but gave it up because of the depredations of wolves and bears. The autumn was stormy and wet. The catch of fish did not come up to expectations. When the cellars of houses filled with water it was necessary to remove the potatoes to prevent them from rotting. Some were stored outdoors in heaps covered with hay and



Kirkjubók
ritud af
Páli presti Þorlákssyni
yfir prestverk hans
medal Íslendinga í Ameríku
Byrjud haustid 1875

Title page of
Church Book
written by Paul, Reverend Thorlaksson
about his parish work
among Icelanders in America
beginning in the fall of 1875

This *Church Book* was translated into English by Dr. George J. Houser at the request of Dr. Paul H.T. Thorlakson, nephew of Reverend Paul, and published by the University of Winnipeg under the title *Pastoral Records, the Reverend Páll Thorlaksson*.

earth, but many of these froze. Supplies were extremely meagre, especially in Arnes district, where some families had only potatoes for subsistence.[15]

That autumn Paul Thorlaksson was unsparing of his failing strength on behalf of others. The full extent of his activity and travels can hardly be imagined from the laconic statement that on his way back to New Iceland from Minnesota and Wisconsin he detoured to the west to visit his companions in the Pembina Hills.

By mid-October he was in Winnipeg again, on his way to Lincoln and Lyon Counties, Minnesota where he appears to have stayed until the end of November. On December 1st, the first Sunday in Advent, and again on Thursday the 5th, he notes in his pastoral records that he conducted services at Pembina, said to have been held at the home of Butler Olsen. On December 9th he conducted a service at Winnipeg before returning to New Iceland.

Returning now to Paul's narrative:

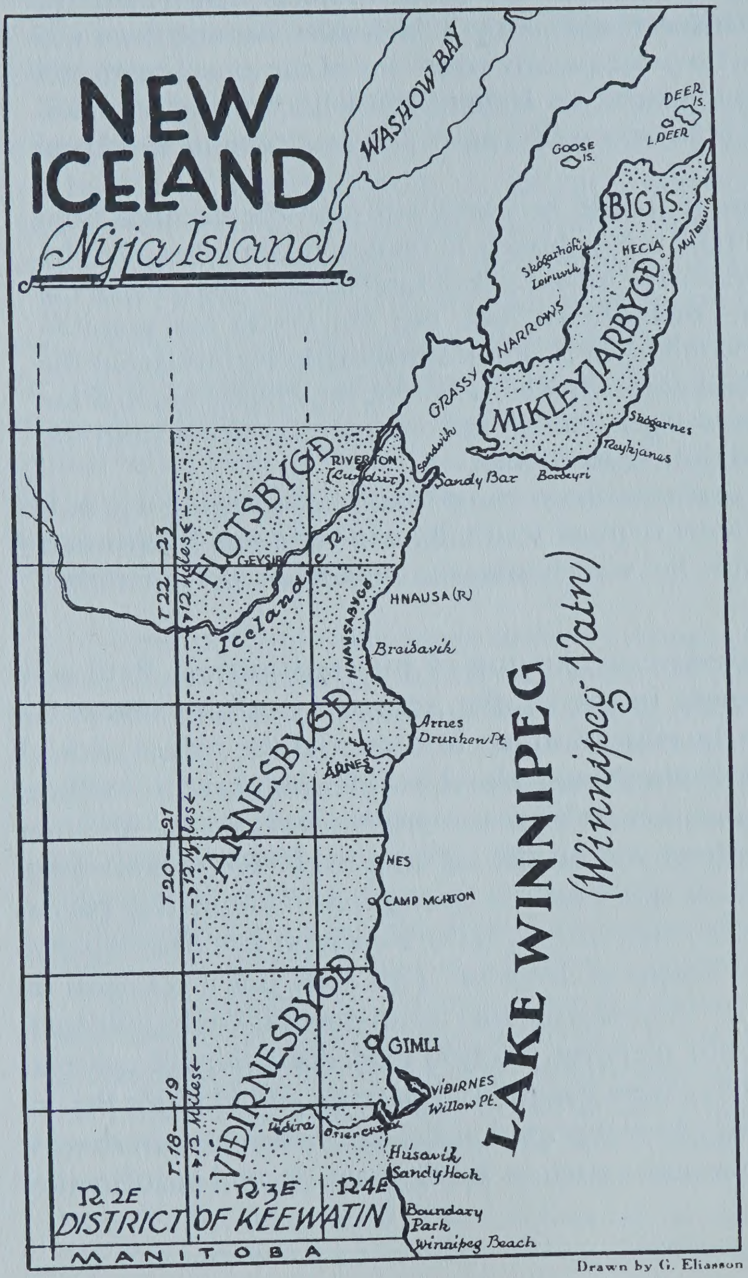
> The winter wore on. Men began to devote thought to the question of moving and to discuss it, at first only in private conversations. As is frequently the case, opinions differed widely. Some people set themselves to composing patriotic songs about New Iceland. *Framfari* published them, but they seem to have had little effect.
>
> Men became increasingly convinced that the future of New Iceland was anything but promising. It was sad, on the other hand, to contemplate abandoning one's home, the fruits of his labour over several years, his government loan, half-finished churches, the graves of dear ones, and then have to begin anew in another wilderness.
>
> The Chairman of the Colony Council, Ólafur Ólafsson, eventually called a meeting to discuss the matter.[16] It was attended, however, by comparatively few men. I expressed the opinion there that if men had valid reason to expect they would be able to make a decent living for themselves and their families in New Iceland and live together like civilized Christians, it was no doubt best for them to remain there. On the other hand, I said, if they had no reason to believe it, then for their own sake and that of their children it was their duty to seek a more propitious location without delay and without contravening the law. I told them what I knew of Dakota.
>
> Just before the meeting was adjourned it was decided that Ólafur Ólafsson and I should be entrusted with preparing an account of conditions at New Iceland as well as a petition to the government with regard to moving out of the colony, the petition to be circulated for the signatures of those desiring to leave.[17]

> Midwinter came and passed. Increasing numbers of men made the tiring journey to inspect land south of the border. Among them was Jón Bergmann, who subsequently wrote one of the most cogent and detailed accounts to reach New Iceland. His letter aroused considerable attention, for he was well known for prudence in word and deed.[18]
>
> At this juncture it should be mentioned that the distance from Gimli in New Iceland to Pembina is 120 miles. It is another 40 miles from Pembina west to the hills. Lack of funds compelled most of the men to cover this distance on foot, but one could not possibly imagine how the women, the children and the elderly could make the journey without assistance. It was, however, imperative not to draw back; the move was urgent, but it met strong opposition from the government agents and their friends.
>
> I discussed the matter with my congregations, inquiring whether it was their firm desire to move south. By and large people favoured this course of action, but were hesitant to embark on such an undertaking unaided.

Despite the progressive weakening of his constitution, Paul continued his involvement in the secular activities outlined above, his responsibilities for the education of children and the preparation of confirmands (thirty-five at New Iceland in 1878 and three in 1879), as well as his tiring journeys on foot to conduct services for his three organized congregations and unofficial ones in the River Settlement and on Big Island. As if this were not enough, he consented to participate in a second public meeting with the Reverend Jón Bjarnason to debate controversial points of doctrine. This took place at Gimli on March 17 and 18, 1879. More satisfactory arrangements were made for it than for the first public meeting. Fridjón Fridriksson served again as chairman and the clerks were Palmi Hjálmarsson and Halldór Briem. The entire proceedings were reported in *Framfari*. Much of the discussion was devoted to matters such as predestination and justification by faith.[19]

Paul's narrative continues:

> By this time [i.e. the early spring of 1879] Ólafur and I had completed the petition to the Canadian government, obtained the signatures of 130 heads of families, translated the document and forwarded it to the government. [See Appendix I.] Based on hearsay from the agents, the reply of the authorities it is too well known to be repeated here. The agents belittled and ridiculed the document and its authors; claimed



NEW ICELAND
(Nýja Ísland)
WASHOW BAY
DEER IS.
L.DEER
GOOSE IS.
BIG IS.
HECLA
Mylnuvik
Skógarhöfði
Leiruvík
NARROWS
GRASSY
MIKLEYJARBYGÐ
Skógarnes
Reykjanes
Borðeyri
Sandvík
Sandy Bar
RIVERTON
(Lundur)
FLJÓTSBYGÐ
GEYSIR
Icelandic R
T22—23
12 Miles
HNAUSA (R)
HNAUSABYGÐ
Breiðavík
ÁRNESBYGÐ
Árnes
Drunken Pt.
ÁRNES
T20—21
12 Miles
NES
CAMP MORTON
VÍÐIRNESBYGÐ
GIMLI
VÍÐIRNES
Willow Pt.
Víðirá
Ósier Creek
T.18—19
12 Miles
Húsavík
Sandy Hook
R.2E
R3E
R4E
DISTRICT OF KEEWATIN
Boundary Park
Winnipeg Beach
MANITOBA
LAKE WINNIPEG
(Winnipeg Vatn)

Drawn by G. Eliasson

Sketch map of New Iceland (Nýja Ísland), on the lower western shore of Lake Winnipeg, north of Winnipeg and Selkirk, Manitoba. Drawn by G. Eliasson. Courtesy: Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Manitoba Archives Collection — Map showing Icelandic Settlement on Lake Winnipeg, 1877.

> there had been underhanded maneuvering, that signatures had been forged and some obtained as a result of undue pressure. They maintained that lying accusations had been made about the agents and New Iceland as well, that both the form and content of the document served to bring discredit upon the Icelanders, yes, and that had the English translation been made by a ten-year-old boy, he would have reason to be ashamed of his work, with more along the same line. *Framfari* had the floor and we did not protest. Time and experience pleaded our cause. Our only thought was to save ourselves and those who wanted to be rescued, to make our way out of the mire on to dry land. Summer came; people gradually surmounted their difficulties, largely through the financial assistance which the Norwegian Synod provided in response to my pleas, so that by the autumn of 1879 about fifty families had settled on choice tracts east of the Pembina Hills.

Most of those fifty families were destitute when they arrived in the Pembina Settlement. Before leaving Canada they were stripped of whatever implements and cows they had obtained under the government loan.

The petition prepared by Ólafur Ólafsson and Paul Thorlaksson was unequivocally rejected by the Department of Agriculture. John Lowe, Secretary of the Department, wrote to John Taylor on April 29, 1879: ". . . And I am to inform you that no part of the indebtedness of those Icelandic colonists who received loans from the Government can be released. The cows or other animals purchased by advances from the Government should not be driven away until such advances are repaid."

With the wisdom and compassion characteristic of him throughout his long life, Björn Pjetursson urged that concessions be made. He said:

> Both Government and settlers had believed that the colony site was well chosen, and originally it had been the intention of the Icelanders to become permanent settlers. Stark experience had now demonstrated that while the country had many good qualities, the drawbacks were too great for people without means. The Canadian Government, which had doubtless made the loan with a view to the development of the country, had been disappointed, as well as the people. This was a speculation that had failed; what was more reasonable than that both parties should share the loss?[20]

Sigtryggur Jónasson and Fridjón Fridriksson, on the other hand, reacted as though the petition were an affront to their personal integrity. Both were adamant in their insistence that no concessions be made at all. In fact, in a letter dated June 12, 1879 to the editor of *Framfari,* published in the issue of June 23 that year, Fridjón Fridriksson insinuated that Paul's role in the preparation of the petition merely reflected his desire to obtain revenge on Sigtryggur for the treatment he had received previously in the colony. In the same letter Fridjón maintained that the colonists, and they alone, were responsible for the difficulties which had beset them. In the light of truth one can only term these judgements as outrageous.

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1. Thorleifur Jackson, *Frá austri til vesturs,* p. 97. English translation by Will Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba,* p. 96 f.

2. A somewhat abridged version of this account was published in the *Almanak* of O.S. Thorgeirsson, VIII (1902), p. 38 ff. This version, translated into English and annotated by the late Dr. Richard Beck, was printed in *The North Dakota Historical Quarterly,* VI, 2 (1932): 150-164. A few years before Dr. Beck's death he graciously granted permission for the inclusion of his scholarly notes in the present work. Where used, they are prefaced by the initials R.B. in parentheses.

3. (R.B.) Jóhann Pjetur Hallsson was born at Geldingaholt in Skagafjardarsýsla, northern Iceland, in 1823. He left Egg on Hegranes in 1876 and settled in New Iceland. His son Gunnar was born in Skagafjardarsýsla on March 29, 1853. He moved to Pembina County in the spring of 1878 and settled in Akra Township but from 1910 until his death made his home at Calder, Saskatchewan.

4. (R.B.) Magnús Stefánsson was born in Kelduhverfi in northern Iceland, December 1, 1853. In 1873 he emigrated to America, landing in Quebec on October 6. He spent the winter in Muskoka, Ontario, where a group of Icelanders had settled; the following summer found him in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In the fall of 1875 he migrated to New Iceland with the first group of Icelanders who settled there. In the summer of 1878 he homesteaded in Pembina County, where he made his home for a period of thirty-five years. He conducted a store for many years, was postmaster at Mountain for a time and policeman during a long period; he proved himself a fearless guardian of the law. He subsequently moved to Climax, Saskatchewan, where for many years he was a merchant.

5. (R.B.) Sigurdur Josúa Björnsson was born in Dalasýsla in western Iceland. In 1874 he emigrated to Kinmount, Ontario, where a small Icelandic settlement had been founded. In the fall of 1875 he migrated to New Iceland. His share in the search for land in North Dakota is described above. He settled in Akra Township in 1878, and for the next ten years made his home in various parts of the Pembina district. In March 1888, he was chosen to select a suitable location for an Icelandic settlement in western Canada. He chose a district near the Red Deer River and settled there along with eleven Icelandic families from the Pembina settlement in the spring of 1889. He lived for several years in Alberta and later in Blain, Washington. He is reported to have died in southern California in 1923. Björnsson was a gifted individual, interested in literature, a man who could turn his hand successfully to varied tasks.

Magnús Stefánsson and Sigurdur Josúa Björnsson were the first Icelanders to file a claim on land in North Dakota.

6. (R.B.) Árni Thorlaksson was born in Eyjafjardarsýsla in northern Iceland, April 29, 1857. He emigrated with his parents to Kinmount, Ontario in 1874. From there he migrated to New Iceland in 1875. He settled in Dakota in 1879, four miles west of Pembina, but a few years later he went to Thingvalla Township. In 1890 he was elected to the lower house of the North Dakota State Legislature and sat as one of its members during the session of 1891. He also held other public offices. He later made his home in Flushing, New York.

7. (R.B.) This settlement, which is located not only in Lyon County but also in Yellow Medicine and Lincoln Counties, was founded in 1875. It is now a flourishing community . For its history and development see "Landnam Islendinga i Minnesota," O.S. Thorgeirsson, *Almanak,* VI: 54 ff.; and Jackson, "The Icelandic Communities in America: Cultural Backgrounds and Early Settlements," 112 ff.

8. (R.B.) This was a Mr. Hunter, editor of *The Standard,* a Winnipeg newspaper. See Bergmann, "Landnam Íslendinga í Nordur-Dakota," 19. Attempts have been made to obtain more information about Hunter, but without success.

9. (R.B.) Reliable sources indicate that the party arrived there on May 9. Cf. *Minningarrit um 50 ára landnam Íslendinga í Nordur-Dakota,* 29 (Árni Magnússon's sketch of Jóhann P. Hallsson).

10. (R.B.) John Bechtel was a Pennsylvania German, one of the first settlers in the Cavalier district. He is remembered as a staunch friend of the Icelandic pioneers in Pembina County. Cf. Bergmann, "Landnam Íslendinga í Nordur Dakota," 20.

11. In 1932 Dr. Beck wrote: "There are now about 2200 Icelandic people in the district, including a little over 200 who are Icelandic on either their father's side or their mother's side." Cf. *Minningarrit um 50 ára landnam Íslendinga í Nordur-Dakota,* 43.

12. (R.B.) His full name was Butler Olsen. Both he and Mrs. Olsen were born in Norway, but had emigrated to America at an early age. Olsen had been a soldier in the Union Army during the Civil War. Like John Bechtel, mentioned above, Olsen frequently proved a generous friend to the Icelanders during their pioneering days in Pembina County. See Bergmann, "Landnam Íslendinga í Nordur-Dakota," 22; *Minningarrít um 50 ára landnam Íslendinga í Nordur-Dakota,* 27; and Jackson, *Saga Íslendinga í Nordur-Dakota,* 25.

This Norwegian (1842-1923) was a friendly and hospitable man whose house was always open and who frequently befriended the earliest Icelandic settlers. Unhappily, he reneged on a large debt in North Dakota and skipped into Manitoba about the turn of the century. There, he changed his name to Holo. Again, he became known for his hospitality to friends and strangers alike. In 1957, the American Army authorities who had located his resting place in the Icelandic cemetery at Brown, Manitoba bestowed on his grave belated honours with a six-man rifle squad.

13. The legality of this seizure was debated at length in *Framfari,* II, 19, 20, 23 and 24.

14. These men were Gudmundur Nordmann and Magnús Bjarnason. A translation of Gudmundur's letter, printed in *Framfari* I, 32, together with a translation of Sigurdur Josúa Björnsson's refutation of it in *Framfari* II, 6, are included in Appendix III.

15. Th. Th. Thorsteinsson, *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi,* III, 136 ff.

16. (R.B.) Ólafur Ólafsson was born July 16, 1834 at Kelduhverfi in northern Iceland. He came to America in 1873 and after a short stay in Ontario went to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He was one of three Icelanders who journeyed to Alaska in search of land in 1874 (cf. Jón Ólafsson, *Alaska, Lýsing á landi og lands-kostum . . .*) but after a winter there he returned to Milwaukee. In 1875 he migrated to New Iceland

and from there in turn to North Dakota in 1879, settling in Gardar Township. From 1888 until about 1900 he made his home in Alberta and British Columbia (three years in the latter province). His last years were spent in Winnipeg. He died on January 30, 1918. Because of his unusual qualities of mind and heart Ólafsson was a beloved leader among Icelandic pioneers in both the United States and Canada. He was ever interested and active in public affairs. See O.S. Thorgeirsson, *Almanak,* XVII: 39 ff. For the dates of Ólafsson's birth and death I am indebted to Mr. Thorgeirsson.

17. In *The Icelandic People in Manitoba,* p. 109 f., W. Kristjanson explains that Ólafur Ólafsson, in his capacity of (newly elected) Chairman of the Colony Council, called this meeting "at Skidastadir in the Arnes district on December 30, 1878, without formally notifying the reeves, or making his intention known outside the Arnes district, where Thorlaksson's strength lay. Those who attended, some forty in number, were almost to a man his supporters. . . . In circulating the petition, Ólafsson bypassed Sigtryggur Jónasson, Jóhann Briem, reeve of the River settlement, and some others, and at a meeting of the colony council was charged with violating the constitution, and the demand was made that he produce the petition. Ólafsson refused, whereupon his resignation was demanded. Ólafsson resigned."

Paul Thorlaksson's English translation of the petition is included in Appendix I.

18. This is the same Jón Bergmann who called his farm, west of Gimli, Dvergasteinn, with whom Thorlaksson stayed when he was not travelling on foot to other parts of New Iceland. Jón was the father of Fridrik J. Bergmann, who, as a schoolboy on summer holiday from Decorah College, Iowa, taught school at New Iceland in Paul Thorlaksson's congregations while Paul was absent in the United States. Later, as the Reverend F.J. Bergmann, he served Icelandic congregations in North Dakota and Winnipeg.

19. Rúnólfur Marteinsson, *Aevisaga séra Jóns Bjarnasonar,* p. 82 f.

20. Will Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba: A Manitoba Saga,* p. 111. With regard to Björn Pjetursson, see also pp. 144, 204 ff., 209.

XV

FAILING HEALTH

PAUL'S NARRATIVE to his father continues:

> That summer [1879] I moved into the district to stay, homesteaded in what is now the center of the settlement and, with the help of my countrymen, built myself a house.[1] At that time my health was already seriously impaired and I was far from fit to occupy the position I held, but much of what had to be accomplished was still undone. The foundation of the settlement had been laid, to be sure, but destitute people, beset by hardships far out in the wilderness, had a long winter to face. Some lost heart, others began to predict calamity and talked of returning to New Iceland. I had begun this undertaking in the Lord's name and continued steadfast in my faith that He would bring it to a happy fruition. My trust was not in vain.

Only from Paul's pastoral records is it possible to glean some idea of the extent to which his health had actually deteriorated by this time. The schedule of his activities doesn't provide any hints, because it would have been exhausting even to a man in the best of health. However, two brief, personal reflections give some indication of his worsening condition. He wrote the first of these after conducting a service at Pembina the Sunday after Easter 1879. It should be mentioned that on Palm Sunday he had confirmed thirteen children in Vídalín Congregation at New Iceland, and during the latter part of Holy Week had conducted four services at Winnipeg. Paul's notation reads: "On account of my chest condition I was now so weak that it was difficult for me to preach and I did not have the strength for it unless it pleased God that my health improved. For about a year I had been suffering from a bad cough." Then he added in quiet resignation: "God's will be done."

By early August 1879 his condition had become even more grave. On the eighth Sunday after Trinity he wrote: "Now I began to spit blood and could no longer exert myself to preach." He did, however, conduct services and continued to administer the sacraments.

Paul's deteriorating health was a subject of serious concern to his family. His mother came west from Wisconsin that summer to keep house for him and prepare nourishing meals. He, on the other hand, began to drive himself harder than ever, as we can see from his account:

> The winter passed, one of the most severe ever experienced in these parts. It sometimes happened that several families were without food at the same time. Thanks, however, to donations made now and again by Norwegians in the Synod and to loans from farmers in the vicinity, it was always possible to avert disaster. I assumed the responsibility myself of repaying the loans when they came due.
>
> Inasmuch as possible everything was used sparingly and in all justice, it may be said that people were frugal and careful that winter.
>
> The reader must bear in mind that most of the families had not yet reaped a crop of any kind; now it was imperative that they cultivate their land and make hay in preparation for the coming summer, but in all truth there was neither seed grain nor sufficient food the spring of 1880. I therefore prevailed upon my brother Haraldur, who had come from Wisconsin the year before with a considerable quantity of livestock, to join me in mortgaging his stock for seed, food and a supply of the most essential agricultural implements.
>
> Although in Minnesota for medical treatment at that time, I constantly had news of what was happening farther north, in both Dakota and New Iceland. Among other things I heard that my detractors in New Iceland were employing every conceivable means to deter the Norwegians from rendering continued assistance to my undertaking. To that end a meeting had been called, open to all residents of the colony, where it had been declared that my actions were detrimental and a disgrace to the Icelanders; that loyalty to the colony demanded an investigation of the matter so that disgrace might fall only on those who deserved it, while the others might be exonerated with their honour and reputation unsullied. Those men who looked with favour on my begging activities were admonished to declare themselves publicly, while there would be published on behalf of the others protests against this disgraceful activity in the English, Norwegian and German papers, so the actions of the "bad

boy" would be exposed to public scrutiny. As was to be expected, many of my friends who did not understand the attitude of these people with regard to assistance and contributions became frightened by the strong language and threats made even by the leaders of the colony, and either slunk into a corner or said in a half whisper that 'they didn't know him'.

There were some, however, who were courageous enough to declare themselves, Jóhann Stefánsson from Tongue River, for instance, who at that time was still at New Iceland 'awaiting a favourable breeze'.

One day in April there was delivered to my bedroom in the home of the Norwegian merchant with whom I was staying at the time in Minnesota[2] a parcel I was not expecting. It contained the Norwegian version of the letter in three languages mentioned above. Forwarded to me by the editor of the *Norwegian Synod Church News,* who apparently had declined printing it on the grounds of lack of space, it was in the handwriting of one of my acquaintances at New Iceland. Upon reading the letter and reflecting on its contents I realized that it could occasion some temporary difficulties with regard to donations and other types of assistance which, in view of the present conditions in Dakota, were indispensable. The writer of the letter declared categorically that my undertaking was entirely unnecessary; New Iceland offered splendid prospects for the future and the people there were highly satisfied with their conditions. Icelanders were reported to be enraged over my activities. The accounts I had written from New Iceland were declared to be false and there were said to be other misstatements as well, obviously calculated to play on the sympathy of generous people, and so on. In addition, it was said to be well known to the signatories that many of the Norwegians from whom aid had been solicited were more unfortunately situated than the Icelanders they were requested to help.

All considered, I realized that in order to counteract the effect of the article when it was published I had to take two actions: first, publish in the papers a brief reply to the article and second, undertake a journey among the Norwegians in Minnesota, explain the situation to them and urge them to lend prompt assistance. I began by approaching the merchant with whom I was staying, showed him the letter and persuaded him to lend our settlement 100 barrels of wheat flour for one year and 40 head of cattle for three years, all at 10% interest.

I thereupon wrote to the management of the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railway Company at St. Paul, pleading with them to transport the cattle and flour to Pembina, a distance of 400 miles, free of charge. Otherwise it would have cost me three hundred dollars. The company lost no time in acceding to my request. The flour reached Pembina, but only 25 head of cattle were sent at that time. The news quickly spread through the settlement; people's hopes were revived, but even with this assistance there were still too many in dire need.

The merchant shook his head at my audacity, asserting that he did all this on my account. I then asked him to lend me a horse so that I might ride out to visit the Norwegian farmers in the neighbourhood and persuade them to lend me an equal amount of cattle. He laughed, but lent me the horse. Two weeks later I had 34 head of cattle driven into the merchant's paddock, to which he added nine of his own. Once more I wrote to the railway company at St. Paul, informed them of what the farmers had done, and inquired what the shipping charge would be now. They replied at once, stating they would also transport these cattle free of charge. They would not, however, commit themselves to any additional promises.

Together with two Norwegian cattlemen I accompanied the cattle north to Pembina, continuing from there to my home. The people were clearly jubilant over this acquisition, but it soon disappeared like a drop in the ocean, for now the population had been increased by a number of destitute people from New Iceland.

I obtained this loan from the farmers on the same terms as the previous one from the merchant, except that the farmers set a lower evaluation on their livestock. But in order to utilize a portion of the cattle as an instalment on debts incurred earlier, which had now become due, and which I was obligated to pay immediately on the settlement's behalf, I was constrained to revaluate the cattle on the basis of the figures set by the merchant, for I had obtained a cash loan of only two hundred dollars. Shortly after my return I called a meeting, explained to the people what I had done, and sought additional information as to their circumstances in general and their expectations of getting along through the coming winter, for if they could manage that, I considered the settlement would be on firm footing.

It then became evident that our efforts to date would not suffice. I volunteered to travel some two hundred miles south into Minnesota in an endeavour to borrow more cattle from the Norwegian congregations there. This proposal was well received. Men promised to do all in their power to obtain work and it is safe to say that few, if any, shirked since they came here.

In July I journeyed south again, although only half the distance I

> had covered before. I either rode or drove through the Norwegian settlements and was well received everywhere, especially by the rural pastors, who either lent me a mount or drove me about as a favour; they invariably accompanied me and nobly supported my cause among the members of their congregations. After nearly two months of this type of travel I had been promised 85 head of cattle, young and old, together with 65 ewes and a small amount of cash. Then, at my behest, two men and two boys from our settlement came to join me. With the aid of the Norwegians we gathered together all the livestock, drove it north, and arrived home with virtually all of it safe and sound on October 2nd.

The pace that Paul maintained throughout the spring and summer of 1880 no doubt further aggravated the deterioration of his lungs. But Paul knew he was responsible for adding to the difficulties of his settlement by bringing destitute families from New Iceland, and he was not going to quit with his tasks undone. He meant to do his utmost to see that the Pembina settlement succeeded and he also meant to minimize the hardships there.

He knew his health was failing, rapidly. He must also have known that if he was to prolong his life he would need rest and relief from stress. Yet he drove himself on. The weight of his responsibilities alone was heavy enough, but in spite of this he went on two long journeys to procure donated cattle to save the colony, and actively participated in driving the cattle home.

Even after bringing the stock back to the colony there are yet pressing needs. He continues:

> I then appointed a committee of three men to place a fair value on this stock, and on that basis we lent most of it in the district with the understanding it would be paid for in three years, one third annually, interest free. Some of the cattle were sold to satisfy the debt the settlement had incurred for food.
>
> I obtained some of this livestock in the form of a three-year, interest-free loan, the rest as an outright gift, but in order to repay the loans to the settlement which I had guaranteed, I had to sell all the cattle, and even then was barely able to satisfy the settlement's obligations. I would mention here that, unfortunately, there are some in our settlement who find it beyond their comprehension how I could have obtained some of the livestock as a gift and yet have good reason for selling all of it upon its arrival here. No goal would be achieved, however, and no significant charitable work brought to fruition if

> one held back through fear of being misunderstood and suspected of unworthy motives by some people, indeed, the very ones who benefited the most, but enough of that.

Here Paul's spiritual leadership is shown at its best, as we see his indifference to criticism when he is convinced that what he is doing is justifiable on the grounds of compassion.

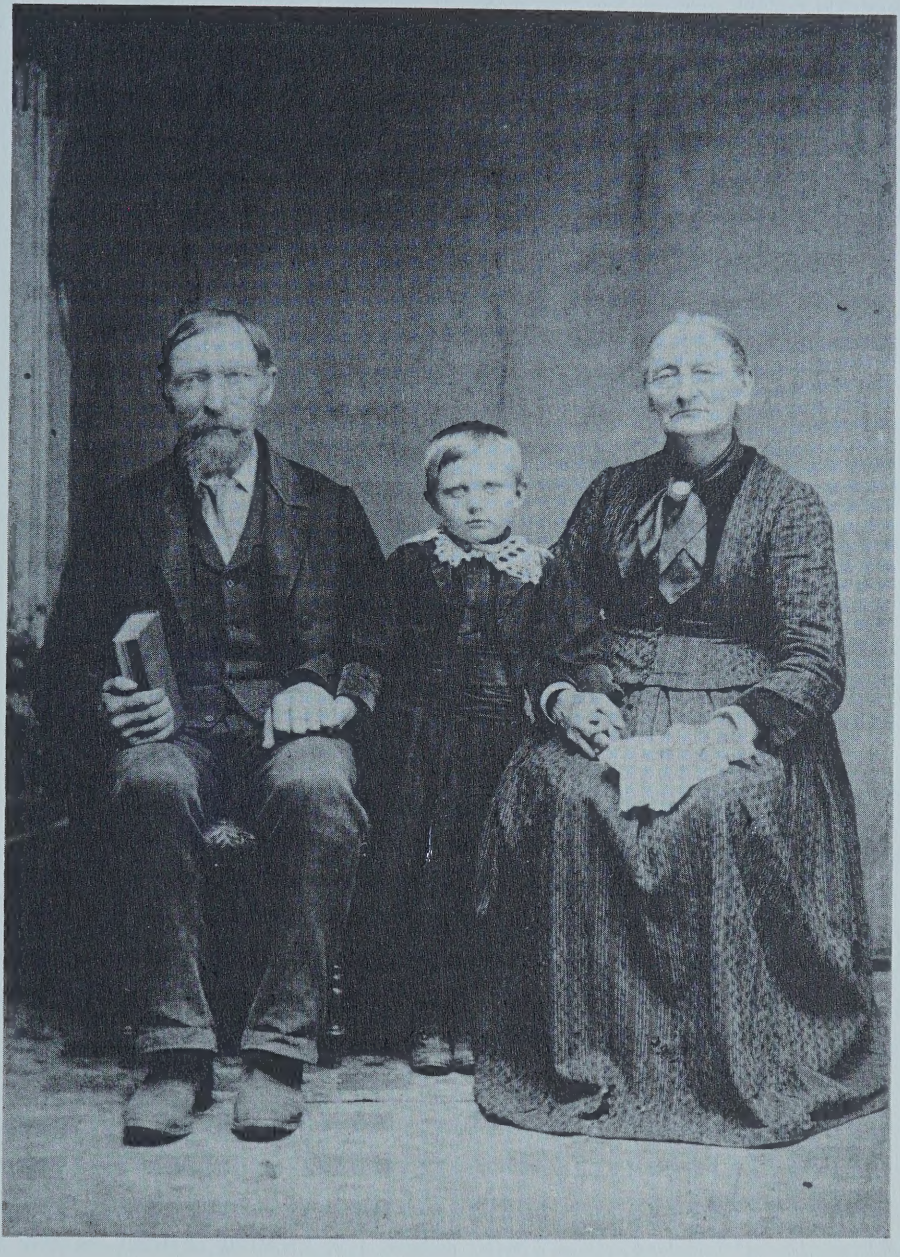
Paul's narrative continues:

> At last there appeared to be good reason to believe our settlement would survive the coming winter, for several farmers had a fair crop that autumn (1880) and our community had been augmented, moreover, by the arrival of a number of self-supporting individuals and even men of some means from Lyon County, Minnesota, and Shawano County, Wisconsin. Quite a few of the settlers who had hired out as harvest hands returned to their homes with appreciable sums of money, and we were also joined by people with means of their own who came from Winnipeg and other places in Manitoba.

Paul Thorlaksson's mother, his brother Haraldur and the latter's wife María Stefanía, together with their four-year-old daughter Lovisa Björg, appear to have been the first Icelanders to have migrated to Dakota Territory from Shawano County, Wisconsin, making the move the summer or early autumn of 1879. No doubt they wanted to be near Paul to assist him as much as possible because of his failing health.

Thorlákur Gunnar Jónsson, Paul's father, came to Dakota with the rest of his children in 1880, at which time all the Icelandic families in Shawano County sold their farms and moved to Pembina County in Dakota Territory. The women and children travelled as far as they could by train, but the men and boys made the journey on foot, driving their livestock with them. A very laconic account of the move is given in the diary of Jón Jónsson:

> *August 1880*
> On the 16th we set out with our livestock on the journey west to Dakota. On the 30th we crossed the Mississippi River. On the 23rd Gudmundur [the father of Stephán G. Stephánsson] and I bought a team of oxen for $75.00. A violent storm on the 27th.
>
> *September 1880*
> The weather was good and dry for the most part and our journey across Minnesota went well. Upon arriving at Fargo I sold one cow for half its value—$10.00—because it was tired out. Most days we



Thorlákur Jónsson and his wife, Henrietta Lovisa, with a granddaughter.

> covered 15 to 20 miles. In the course of the journey I sent seven postcards.
>
> *October 1880*
> Warm dry weather until the middle of the month. Rain and high winds on the 14th and 15th and frost at night. It snowed on the 26th. On Monday, the 4th, we arrived here at the Icelandic settlement at Park, exactly seven weeks after leaving Shawano. I started at once to help Stephán with building a house. On the 20th I started construction of a cow barn for myself. . . . On the 24th I wrote to Snorri Högnason and sent him two dollars and fifty cents for my dues in the literary society. On the 31st I attended the service and received communion.

Dictating to his father in February 1882, Paul continues:

> The situation in New Iceland was now such that even some of those who had praised that district to the skies the previous spring were now discouraged and longed more than ever to leave, for shortly after the above mentioned article appeared in the papers, Lake Winnipeg overflowed and inundated a large part of the colony. [This was on November 5, 1879.] The eyes of shortsighted men were opened and even they now admitted the much vaunted New Iceland was too swampy for large settlements to prosper there.

In the following statement, Paul cannot resist a gentle thrust of irony aimed at his detractors. "That flood was followed by others. The authors of the famous document refrained from sending to the papers fresh reports on the delightful conditions prevailing in New Iceland as well as other matters they had contemplated with unjustified optimism."

Although the flood of November 5th did not destroy any buildings, according to Will Kristjanson, "the cattle suffered from lack of pasture, and there was a great shortage of hay during the winter. Some of the cattle perished, and others had to be killed for lack of fodder, while a herd of about one hundred was sent from New Iceland to a Manitoba farm for winter feeding."[3]

At the time Paul was dictating this account, no longer strong enough to write it himself, New Iceland had been deserted, except for some 250 people, "twelve homes in the Willow Point district, five in Arnes, twenty-five in the River Settlement, and eight or ten on Big Island."[4]

Paul continues:

More than a year has elapsed since then and it is remarkable how much progress our settlement has made in that time. It is improbable that anyone familiar with conditions here can doubt that within a few years the district will be flourishing. Not least of the grounds for that expectation is the reported decision of a prospering railway company to extend its line through the settlement, east of the hills. Now people of other national origins are vying to settle here. Everyone admires the beauty and richness of the land and the advantages of having sufficient wooded tracts, grassland and excellent water flowing from the hills. Consequently, nearly all the tracts have been claimed.

As of now, the settlement can hardly be extended except westward to the hills, which have not yet been surveyed. Thus far we have explored these hills only on a small scale. For my part, for instance, I have travelled no farther than three or four miles west into them. The hillsides and dales in the eastern portion are covered with forests and groves of willow, above which there extends an undulating grassy plain as far as the eye can see. Several families, Icelanders included, have already homesteaded there and are well pleased with the quality of the soil.

What we refer to as our settlement is a strip 16 miles long and 6 to 12 miles wide. Men who have explored farther west report lakes full of fish, forests and the same excellence of soil far west of the hills and, still farther west, more hills and mountains, surpassing these in scenic beauty and other respects as well. For the time being, homesteading is not permitted more than 24 miles west from the edge of the hills, but as is customary, permission will no doubt be granted by the United States Government as migration proceeds farther west.

A Norwegian pastor who travelled through this region last spring reports having come across a large lake covered with swans, geese and ducks, without, however, speaking of 'catching them with his bare hands', nor did he expound on 'fish shaped like candles'.[5]

I expect that by this time the reader will think me verbose. Nevertheless I should like to mention a small detail which may serve to give my countrymen a clear idea of how quickly a diligent farmer can get ahead here.

Two young bachelors, Sigurjón Sveinsson and Benedikt Jóhannesson, came here from Wisconsin the summer of 1879 and homesteaded side by side, building for themselves rather rough shacks. They went into partnership, taking turns staying home and hiring out. They had, to be sure, little cash, but a sound knowledge of farming. The autumn of 1881, or perhaps that of 1880, they harvested from their tracts 400 barrels of the finest quality wheat flour and 150 of oats. This was in addition to the usual garden produce. During this period they also purchased livestock and began to build up a herd of cattle.

Confined to my bed, suffering from a long illness, I have put the foregoing together at the request of others, but someone else has transcribed it. I cannot take the responsibility for its being letter perfect, but I do guarantee that if anything is misstated, it can only be a matter of no consequence.

If my account contributes to a better understanding of our settlement and the reasons for establishing it, my purpose will have been realized. My countrymen at home, who struggle from year to year on hard, barren soil, can comprehend more fully that the Lord has provided good land here, for them as well, if they have the ability and the will to take advantage of it.

And so may the Lord be praised for His never-failing help to us, undeserving sinners though we be.

Mountain Post Office, Pembina Co., Dakota, February 11, 1882.

Paul Thorlaksson

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1. In Certificate No. 3279, issued at Washington, D.C. October 4, 1884, and signed by United States President Chester A. Arthur, Paul Thorlaksson's homestead is described as follows: "The northeast quarter of the northeast quarter of section sixteen, the southeast quarter of the southeast quarter of section nine, the southwest quarter of the southwest quarter of section ten, and the northwest quarter of the northwest quarter of section fifteen in township one hundred and sixty north of range fifty-six west of the Fifth Principal Meridian, in Dakota Territory, containing one hundred and sixty acres."

2. (R.B.) This merchant was Harald Thorson of Northfield, Minnesota, widely known for his business activities.

3. Will Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba: A Manitoba Saga*, p. 127.

4. Gudlaugur Magnússon, Thorgeirsson's *Almanak* 1899, cited by W. Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba*, p. 129.

5. This would appear to be an allusion to exaggerations about Lake Winnipeg.

XVI

The Ultimate Sacrifice

IT WOULD HAVE TAXED the strength and vitality of a robust man to have driven himself as Paul did the last few years of his life, and Paul was gradually weakened by the ravages of "consumption." Yet his concern was invariably for others, rather than himself. On November 19, 1879 he wrote from the village of Pembina to *Kirketidende (The Church Times),* a publication of the Norwegian Synod. This letter was printed in issue number 49:

> Since the beginning of October contributions have been coming in little by little, so that I have now received more than seven hundred dollars, some of which I have used to defray the debt I had to incur on account of the pressing need. I had to buy a number of milk cows and a quantity of wool and flour as well as extend help to families just arriving here. Yesterday evening two families came here to Pembina from Winnipeg, one of which was able to pay its own way, the other consisting of a widow with five children, whom I helped. This woman came to Winnipeg a year and a half ago and was widowed there for the second time when her husband died of measles shortly after their arrival. Now she was without help in a strange land with six children, one of them born the day his father died. Then the Lord provided for her eldest and only fully grown son to obtain some kind of steady employment, but he was not able to help his mother and younger brothers and sisters any longer than until last spring. Then they saw him drown in the Red River while trying to drag ashore driftwood to burn as fuel at home. Since then the mother has managed for the most part on what her twelve-year-old son earned going around the city, shining shoes. The demands of the winter made it impossible, however, for her to remain in Winnipeg without

> assistance from others. Now, my dear brothers and sisters, who of your Christian mercy have sent me contributions to move my unfortunate parishioners from New Iceland and Manitoba to the Red River Valley, you have visited a widow and orphans in their affliction. Today or tomorrow this widow—God willing—plans to move to the Icelandic colony at the foot of the Pembina Hills, 40 miles southwest of here, with all her children and her few possessions.
>
> She will live temporarily in the log house which was recently built for me there. I have bought her a cow and some wool, to enable her to support herself by knitting socks and other items. I mention this to illustrate our circumstances here. This is merely one of many instances where help is needed so desperately. The desirability of that help and the necessity for it can be more clearly appreciated, however, when it is remembered that we also have an obligation to assist parents here to look after the spiritual welfare of their children and to receive into congregations their brothers and sisters who might otherwise be alienated from the church—into congregations where they are united by the word of God and where their membership can make a contribution to the spread of His kingdom. May it not be to my discredit then, dear brothers and sisters, that I dare urge you to continue your help. Let my opponents call me a beggar and solicitor of alms. I am delighted to hear it, for I know for whom I am begging. In conclusion I thank you from the bottom of my heart for what you have done for us. May the Lord bless both the givers and the gifts in Jesus Christ's name.
>
> Pembina, November 19, 1879.
> P. Thorlaksson

Translated into Icelandic, this letter, together with a variety of other material, was printed in the final special issue of *Framfari,* edited by Sigtryggur Jónasson, April 10, 1880. The concluding article was an unfair accusation that Paul and the Norwegian Synod used financial assistance as bait to lure Icelanders into the Synod, withholding such assistance from any who would not join Paul's congregations. This article was roundly refuted in the same issue of the paper by Ólafur Ólafsson from Espiholl.

Writing from his homestead near the village of Pembina, Ólafur made a spirited defence of the generosity and honourable motives of the Norwegians who had extended a helping hand to the needy Icelanders. He asserted that the fruit of that help would be a sturdy and prosperous Icelandic settlement which would be a permanent reminder of the Norwegians' goodwill. He continued by affirming that although he and his neighbours in the vicinity of the village looked upon Paul Thorlaksson as their pastor, none of them had ever received any money or gifts from the Norwegian Synod. "Nor," he continued, "are we yet affiliated with any church body. People may then expect from us a more impartial judgment of Paul's actions than they could from either members of congregations he had organized or from those who had become his adamant opponents."

During the winter of 1879-1880, Paul concerned himself with more than alleviating the pressing needs of individuals and providing for the spiritual welfare of both children and adults; by January of 1880 he had organized three elementary schools in Pembina County, all of which were functioning well.[1]

There was no formal church organization in Pembina County that winter. Actually, it was not until almost a year later that Paul took the first steps toward organizing congregations on a formal basis. The first meeting for this purpose was held in the Park River district on November 24, 1880. It was attended by twelve men, Stephán G. Stephánsson, the poet, serving as secretary.

The name Gardar Congregation was chosen to honour the memory of Gardar Svavarsson, a ninth-century Swedish resident of Denmark who learned by chance of the existence of Iceland in the year 860, when his ship was driven off course by gales. According to tradition he came to land at the site of the present town of Husavik, where Paul was born, on the north coast.

Reminiscing about that meeting thirty years later, Stephán G. Stephánsson recalled that the majority of those present affixed their signatures to the constitution of twenty-one articles, identical, except in minor respects such as the name of the congregation, to the ones which had been in effect in Paul's New Iceland congregations. Stephán, however, did not sign it. When Paul called his attention to this, Stephán replied that it was not a matter of negligence, but because he could not give assent to two of the articles, the one asserting the authority and interpretation of the creeds, and the article withholding from women the right to vote at congregational meetings.

"Some of the creeds," he said, "I have never read and have no idea of their content. Furthermore I do not regard the distinction between the voting rights of men and women to be a commandment of God.

"Paul did not argue with me. He merely inquired good-naturedly whether I would sign the constitution, but indicate my disagreement with those two articles. I assented to that. I never learned the outcome of the matter. Neither of us mentioned the subject again. I was, however, accepted as a member of the congregation."[2]

Six days later, on November 30, 1880, a similar meeting was held at Vik (now Mountain, N.D.), attended by twenty-three men. Paul's father, Thorlákur Gunnar Jónsson, was appointed secretary. The minutes of the Gardar meeting were read and the same constitution adopted. A third congregation with the same constitution was organized on January 2, 1881, at the home of Jóhann Hallsson at Tongue River. Eighteen attended. The secretary chosen was Palmi Hjálmarsson.

Of the three districts where congregations were organized, only Mountain was populous enough to warrant building a church. Paul suggested a modest structure which might be used as a schoolhouse and for community functions as well as church services, and offered to donate a corner of his homestead for this purpose, the allocation sufficiently large to accommodate a small cemetery as well. Paul's offer was accepted but several years were to pass before the church structure became a reality. In the meantime, services and congregational meetings were held in Paul's log home, which in 1881 he had enlarged to half again its original size in order to accommodate such gatherings.

Members of the Mountain congregation held their second annual meeting on January 4, 1882. There were fifty-five in attendance in addition to Paul. He presided over the meeting even though he was so ravaged by his tuberculosis that he was but the shadow of a man. It was his last public function. His address was probably read by the secretary because Paul was too weak to read it himself. It is preserved by his own hand in his personal records:

> My dear brothers:
>
> You have chosen me and extended a call to me to become your pastor and spiritual advisor, responsible for matters pertaining to our religious life. . . . You can now perceive as clearly as I do myself how precarious my condition has become, particularly in view of the serious breakdown in health with which the Lord has seen fit to afflict me. The next step would appear to be for me to resign or request release from my duties here, to enable you to extend at once a call to another pastor. Our present circumstances are such, however, that I cannot bring myself to relinquish the stewardship of the

church we have organized together unless it be the express desire and will of all my congregations. I acknowledge, on the other hand, my duty to continue in my post to the extent my failing health permits, if my congregations so wish and see no better solution. . . . With regard to my stipend for the year just ended, at the last annual meetings of the congregations I was promised, on the basis of voluntary pledges from each individual, a total from all three congregations of $202.00 in cash, 29 bushels of wheat, 9 bushels of oats, and 23 days of work, to wit: from Park congregation $54.00, 9 bushels of wheat and 6 bushels of oats; from Mountain $95.00, 8 bushels of wheat, 3 bushels of oats and 22 days of work; from Tongue River $53.00, 11 bushels of wheat and one day's work. . . . Fulfillment of the pledges surpassed my expectations, so that little remains to be paid, as the statements of the treasurers will indicate, except for Tongue River congregation, where one quarter of the money pledged remains unpaid. . . . I would also mention that several men who were not present at the meetings nevertheless took the responsibility of contributing to the pastor's stipend, and this is indicated in the reports. Just the same, I could not see my way clear to refuse the sum of $300.00, offered me in a spirit of fraternal co-operation by the Norwegian Synod. Even though it places me under no obligation other than that imposed by my conscience, I should have preferred not having had to accept it. . . . I would particularly recommend to the congregations that they continue meeting for worship as they have the past year and not let themselves become discouraged from this practice. Some people are reluctant to admit that although Christ bade us pray to him in private, he also commanded us to acknowledge and worship him publicly, as prescribed by the word of God and as circumstances permit. To neglect the services which congregations and pastors have dedicated to the public worship of God is a greater sin than is realized by men who give the matter but passing thought. . . . I would, moreover, urge all my Christian countrymen in these settlements to take more interest than some have up to now in attending congregational meetings and sharing our efforts to spread and extend the kingdom of God.

At the beginning of the year 1882
To my congregations at Park,
Mountain and Tongue River.
Paul Thorlaksson

The reaction to Paul's message was mixed. Some declared that rather than try to replace him as their pastor they would prefer to forego pastoral services, for a long time if necessary, in hope of his eventual recovery. Others were more realistic. As no agreement could be reached that day, the meeting was adjourned until January 25th.

In 1888 the Reverend Fridrik J. Bergmann reported that Paul, after having consulted the other two congregations, suggested that a call be extended to his cousin Hans B. Thorgrimsen as his replacement, who was to graduate the following June from the theological seminary Paul had attended, Concordia Seminary in St. Louis.[3]

The actual situation, however, appears to have been a little more complex. Fridrik Bergmann, who was not present, based his account on second-hand information. Stephán G. Stephánsson, on the other hand, although he did not write of the same events until 1910, had an excellent memory and was actually present on the occasions in question.

There can be no doubt that the Mountain congregation was willing to agree to Paul's suggestion. Opinion in the Gardar congregation, however, was divided. In a letter of August 15, 1910 to his friend Baldur Sveinsson, Stephán wrote:

> The truth of the matter is that both groups in the Gardar congregation, those who favoured the Synod and those who opposed it, had agreed on trying to obtain a pastor from home as a compromise measure. Pastor Paul was in complete agreement and declared that to be the only way out of the impasse he and the Rev. Jón Bjarnason had created in the spiritual life of Icelanders here. I am stating the truth. That was the last conversation I had with Paul. It is still perfectly clear in my memory. Paul and I got along well together. I do not know, however, whether any of those who were there with me on that occasion remember what happened. That was over twenty-eight years ago.

Only a few weeks of Paul's life remained. He died on March 12, 1882, but the deep snow and bitter cold made it impossible to hold his funeral until April 2nd, when he was laid to rest in the land he had donated to the Mountain congregation for a cemetery and church. The funeral service was conducted by a Norwegian pastor, the Reverend Christian Flaten. Paul's younger brother Niels Steingrímur delivered a eulogy in Icelandic.

Four Icelandic children were baptized beside Paul's coffin: Jónina Gudný, daughter of Hans Nielsson and Gudbjörg Gísladóttir; Páll Bjarnason, son of Bjarni Bjarnason from Vididal and Gróa Jónsdóttir; Carl Alexander, son of Jón Finnbogason and Jóhanna Sigurdardóttir;

and Jóhanna, daughter of Indridi Sigurdsson and Sigurbjörg Kristjánsdóttir.[5]

For more than a year after Paul Thorlaksson's death the Icelanders in North America were without an ordained minister who spoke their own language.

Because of the failing health of Jón Bjarnason's father as well as other personal reasons, Jón and Lára had left New Iceland in the spring of 1880 to return to Iceland. On Palm Sunday, March 21, 1880, Jón ordained Halldór Briem to be his successor in New Iceland along with the Trinity congregation in Winnipeg. The exodus from New Iceland, which had begun in 1878, had now become general. *Framfari* had ceased publication with a special issue early in 1880. It soon became apparent that the depleted colony could not continue to pay a minister's stipend.

After one winter of living in a primitive dugout on the outskirts of the village of Minneota, Rev. Halldór and his wife, the former Susan Taylor, whom he had married in September 1880, daughter of William and niece of John Taylor, left permanently for Iceland. Halldór taught for a time at the newly opened school at Mödruvellir where, according to some of his pupils, he was remembered as a pedant. He ended his days as an assistant librarian at the National Library.

At a continuation of the January 1882 annual meeting of the Mountain congregation, held after Paul's death in March, a call was prepared and forwarded to Hans Thorgrimsen, Paul's cousin, who was to graduate the following June from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. He accepted the call, but with the proviso that he take up his duties a year later, as he desired to spend the winter with his parents in Iceland. His request was granted and he held his first service at Mountain outdoors on August 5, 1883.

That same summer Fridrik J. Bergmann and Paul's younger brother Niels Steingrímur left the Dakota settlement for Norway to study theology at the University of Christiania (Oslo). Niels Steingrímur Thorlaksson graduated there in 1887. Fridrik Bergmann, however, remained in Oslo only one year, and completed his theological studies at the Lutheran seminary at Mount Airy, in the vicinity of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

In the meantime Icelanders had begun to prosper in the city of Winnipeg. The Icelandic population of the city had been considerably augmented by the arrival of families from New Iceland and immigrants from Iceland.

The former Trinity congregation in Winnipeg was reorganized under the name First Lutheran Congregation, and extended a call to the Reverend Jón Bjarnason in Iceland. Jón accepted the call and conducted the first service for his new charge on Wednesday evening, August 20, 1884. For some time services were held on the premises of an Icelandic social club.

Now there were two ordained Icelandic Lutheran ministers in North America, the Reverend Hans B. Thorgrimsen at Mountain, North Dakota, and the Reverend Jón Bjarnason in Winnipeg.

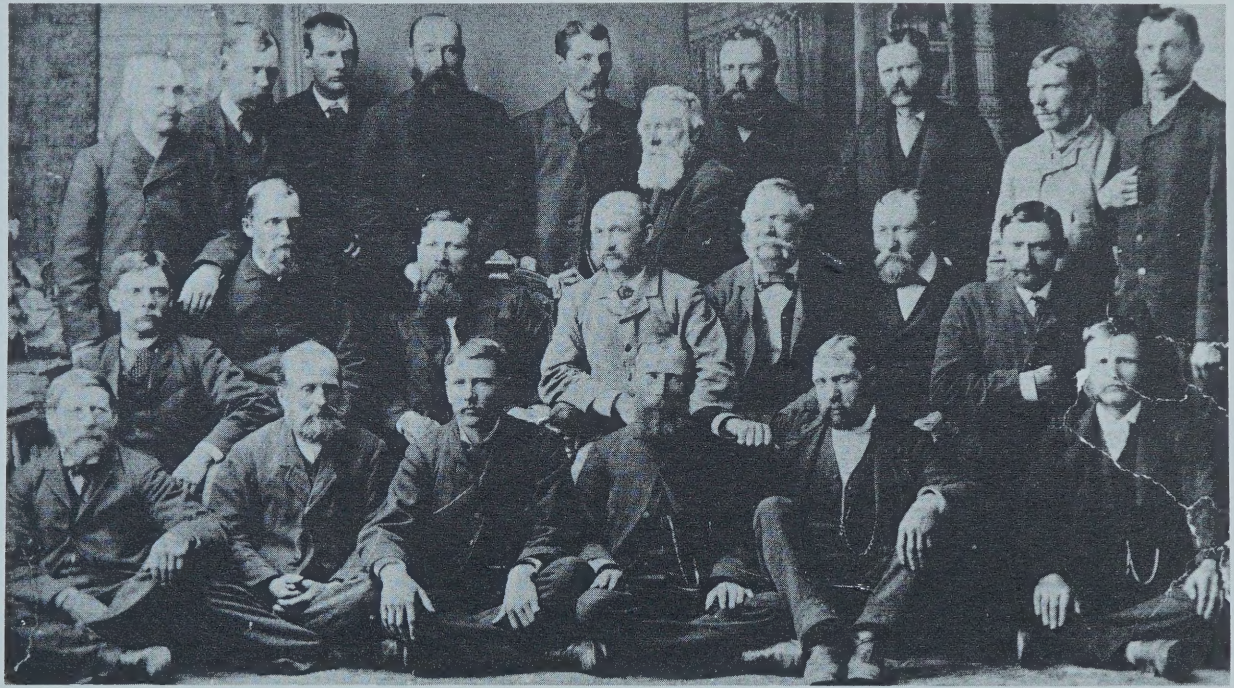
At a meeting at Mountain on March 10, 1884, plans were made to erect a church on the lot Paul Thorlaksson had donated for a cemetery and where he had been laid to rest two years earlier. The church was forty-six feet long by twenty-eight wide and was built of oak beams. Construction began that spring and, except for altar and pulpit, pews and belfry, was completed in the course of the summer. The interior and exterior of the church were subsequently refinished and a belfry added, but this Icelandic Lutheran church, the oldest in North America, still stands essentially as it was completed in the summer of 1884, and continues in regular use. The congregation, however, now includes people of other national origins as well as those of Icelandic descent.

Originally the three congregations Paul established in North Dakota—Mountain, Gardar and Tongue River—were affiliated with the Norwegian Synod, but this affiliation did not have unanimous approval. In 1884 only the Mountain congregation and its pastor, the Reverend Hans B. Thorgrimsen, were affiliated with the Synod.

It was, however, Hans Thorgrimsen's conviction that all the Icelandic Lutheran congregations on both sides of the international border should be united in a single Icelandic Lutheran synod.

At a meeting of the Mountain congregation on December 2, 1884, the Reverend Hans proposed the appointment of a committee to co-operate with committees to be chosen by other congregations in drafting a constitution for an association of Icelandic congregations. One of the members of this committee was Paul's brother Haraldur Thorlaksson. At a second meeting held at Mountain on January 23 and 24, 1885, it was agreed to hold the first meeting of the new Synod in Winnipeg the following June.

Thus, with a display of goodwill from both factions which had once been at loggerheads, there came into being the Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod of America.



The Icelandic Lutheran Synod Conference, 1885. Its first annual conference was held in the Progressive Society Hall, Winnipeg, and included congregations of Winnipeg, Argyle, New Iceland and the Dakotas. Reverend Jón Bjarnason was elected president. *Top Row (left to right):* Fr. J. Bergmann, E.H. Bergmann, J. Hall, B. Jónsson, P.S. Bardal, B. Pétursson, J. Stefánsson, Benedikt Pétursson, St. G. Stephánsson, B.L. Baldvinsson. *Middle Row:* Magnús Paulson, Fr. Fridriksson, séra Jón Bjarnason, Árni Fridriksson, Gísli Jónsson, Þorl. G. Jónsson, Sigurdur Josúa Björnsson. *Bottom Row:* Kristján Kjaernested, Fr. Jónsson, Gudm. Björnsson, Jón Ólafsson, Þorsteinn Jóhannesson, Ólafur Gudmundsson. Photograph: Provincial Archives of Manitoba, New Iceland Collection, 297.

In the spring of 1886 the Reverend Hans Thorgrimsen received a call from Norwegian congregations in Sioux Falls, Dakota. The congregation at Mountain extended a call to the Reverend Fridrik J. Bergmann, newly ordained upon his graduation from Mount Airy Seminary in Pennsylvania. Along with the Mountain congregation he was to serve three other charges in North Dakota. He conducted his first service in the church at Mountain on Sunday, July 5, 1886. He was subsequently elected secretary of the Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod. The Reverend Jón Bjarnason had been elected president.

Niels Steingrímur Thorlaksson returned to America the summer of 1887 to accept a call from the Icelandic congregations in Lincoln and Lyon Counties, Minnesota. On August 21st that year, he was ordained in the church at Mountain by the Reverend Jón Bjarnason. This was the first ordination to be conducted within the newly organized Icelandic Synod of America.

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1. This was reported in a letter Jón Jónsson from Skagafjörd wrote January 7, 1880 to his old friend Jón Rögnvaldsson at Markland, N.S., cited in *Tímarit* VII, 128, and by Th. Th. Thorsteinsson, *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi,* III, 117.

2. Stephán G. Stephánsson, *Bréf og ritgerdir,* IV, p. 86 f.

3. Fridrik J. Bergmann, "Saga Víkr-safnadar," *Sameíníngín* III, 7 (Sept. 1888): 116 f.

Rev. Hans went on to become one of the most beloved ministers among the Icelanders in America. A handsome, charming, well-built man, he was also gifted with a God-given voice, which although untrained was as fine as that of the best professionals.

His absolute stand against drink and dancing prompted the witty Icelandic-American poet K.N. Julius to satirize him unmercifully. After describing a wild scene of revelry where beer was "overflowing" he closes the poem thus:

Þar var söngur, Þar var dans,
Þar var ég og Séra Hans.

("There was song and there was dance, / and there was I and Rev. Hans.")

Rev. Hans was not amused. His comment was: "I could sue him for that!"

4. Thorstina Jackson, *Saga Íslendinga í Nordur-Dakota,* p. 59.

5. Brynjolfur Sveinsson, ed., *Minningar frá Mödruvellum,* passim.

XVII

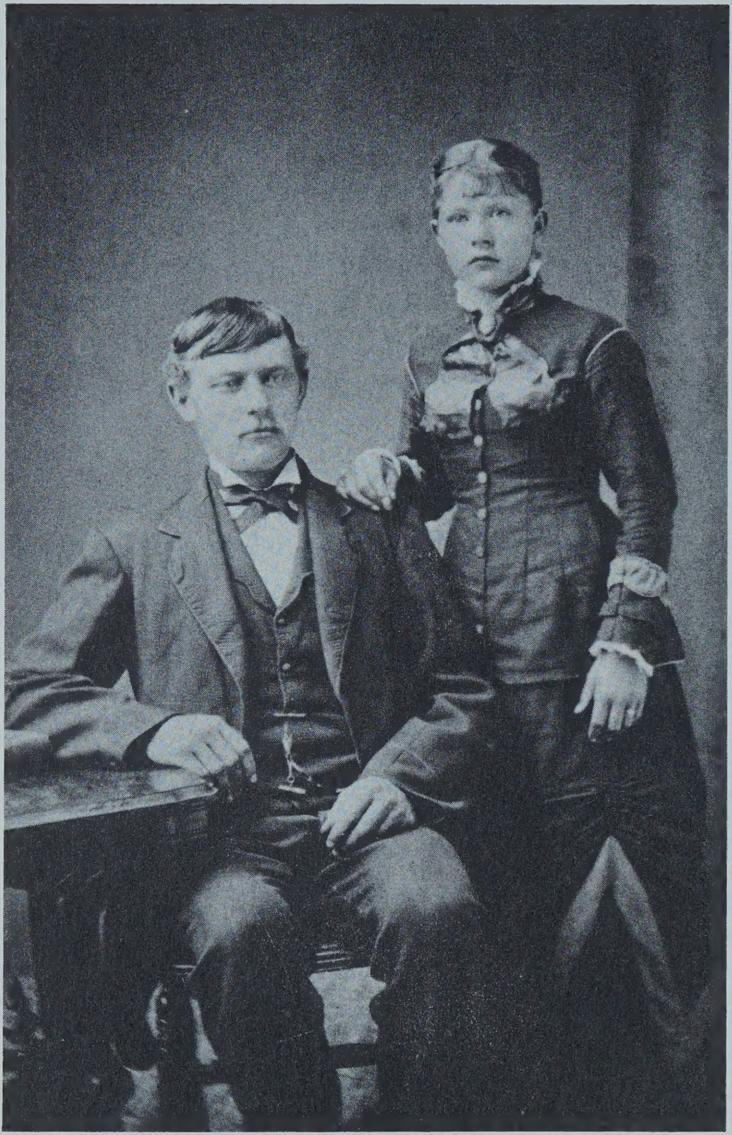
IN MEMORIAM

ONLY AFTER PAUL'S DEATH did many of his fellow countrymen, including some of his most vehement opponents, begin to appreciate the extent of his contribution to the well-being of Icelanders in North America.

The oldest Icelandic Lutheran church on this continent, Víkur Lutheran Church at Mountain, North Dakota, still in regular weekly use, came into being as a result of Paul's vision. Except for a few minor details, it was completed the summer of 1884. The first pastor was the Reverend Hans B. Thorgrimsen, Paul's cousin, and although the congregation was at first affiliated with the Norwegian Synod, it was Thorgrimsen's conviction that the Icelandic congregations on both sides of the border should be united in a single Icelandic Lutheran synod. The summer of 1885 the Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod of North America became a reality.

During the 1880s the Pembina settlement succeeded in holding its own. Little by little the farmers extended their acreage and managed to wipe out their debts as well as those that Paul and his brother Haraldur had incurred on their behalf.

At a meeting of the Icelandic Lutheran Synod it was proposed that funds be collected to erect a suitable monument over Paul Thorlaksson's grave, individual donations to be in the range of three to four dollars. According to Louise (Lovisa Thorlakson) Gislason of Brown, Manitoba, her father Jón, a younger brother of Rev. Paul, sold the only two horses he owned to contribute to the monument fund. The monument became a reality in 1894.



Reverend Paul Thorlaksson's younger brother, Jón, and his bride, Petrína Gudnádóttir. Petrína saw three of her sisters carried out in their coffins during the smallpox epidemic of 1876. At twelve, she walked to Winnipeg from Gimli to try to find domestic work. She was just sixteen at the time of her marriage. Wedding photograph, Pembina, Dakota Territory, 1880.

Sameiningin (November 1894), published monthly by the Icelandic Lutheran Synod and edited by the Reverend Jón Bjarnason, carried the following account:

> On October 30th a group of people assembled at Mountain, North Dakota, for the unveiling of a monument to the late Pastor Paul Thorlaksson, erected over his grave in Mountain Cemetery. Twelve years have passed since Pastor Paul's death and fifteen since he founded the Icelandic colony in Pembina County, North Dakota. The programme in the church included instrumental and vocal music as well as addresses. The Rev. Fridrik J. Bergmann delivered an eloquent eulogy. Mr. Rúnólfur Marteinsson spoke of radical changes, their advantages and drawbacks. The Rev. Jonas A. Sigurdsson discussed Pastor Paul's relevance in the commemoration of the Reformation, observed in the Lutheran Church at this time of year. Pastor Steingrímur Thorlaksson, a brother of the late Pastor Paul, spoke of his brother's faith in the cause to which he had dedicated his life, his conviction of the divine inspiration of scripture, the love he bore for his fellow men and his concern for their welfare, both temporal and spiritual. The addresses concluded, the congregation assembled around the monument in the churchyard, which was then unveiled and dedicated to Pastor Paul's memory. The monument is of English granite, very handsome, with clean unbroken lines, relieved only by a fold of drapery carved at the top. On the stone are recorded Pastor Paul's name, the dates of his birth and death, the year of his ordination and the year he founded the colony. The stone on Pastor Paul's grave should serve not only as a monument to his memory, but also as witness to generations still unborn that Icelanders can value the worth of their men.

The Reverend F.J. Bergmann's eulogy at the unveiling of the monument was printed in *Sameiningin* (January 1895). Outstanding for its frankness on an occasion of this nature, where uncritical praise was more often the rule, it permits no doubt as to the speaker's impartiality. The most salient passages are these:

> Those who listened to Pastor Paul, whether members of a group gathered together for worship or just one or two calling on him at his home, had the strong impression that here was a man who held firm convictions—a man wholly untouched by the skepticism of this age. Even in minor matters he believed he perceived the operation of a consistent, decisive purpose, and he held this view so firmly that it was out of the question to imagine the possibility of any deviation,

Víkur Lutheran Church, Mountain, North Dakota, the oldest Icelandic church in America, completed by the summer of 1884 on land donated by Reverend Paul Thorlaksson. Reverend Jón Bjarnason, President of the Icelandic Synod, dedicated the Víkur Church on June 24, 1887. The tall monument in the foreground is Reverend Paul's headstone. Reprinted from *Pastoral Records, The Reverend Páll Thorlaksson* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: The University of Winnipeg, 1978).

> either to the right or left. He was constantly prepared to defend his views and do battle against anyone who opposed them. By nature he was little inclined to compromise. Those who engaged him in argument invariably learned that to his mind there was only one correct view—the one he held himself. He was positively indefatigable in argument, emphatic but calm. I never knew him to lose his temper, regardless of what was said to him. When his opponent became most heated was precisely the time he displayed the utmost calm and deliberation. His reasoning was steady and controlled, and he had an excellent knack of applying logic to break a subject down into its component parts. . . . One did not have to know him long to realize that he was an exceptionally kind man. His forceful language and decisive views either attracted men to him or repelled them—all depending on the type of men they were. . . . Above all else, it was his desire to build up *Lutheran* congregations among the Icelandic Christians in this land, but he tried too hard. There is little doubt that the by-laws of his congregations proved too heavy fare for weak digestions. He did not exercise the tact and finesse always essential in these matters. It was natural that he should have been misunderstood, especially since he was somewhat inclined to place undue emphasis on trivial details and magnify them to the status of fundamental principles. This invariably served to alienate brother from brother in matters of doctrine and faith. It was, however, a consequence of his profound respect for truth, from which he would not veer, not by a single step.[1]

This is a keen analysis of Rev. Paul's character; and perhaps the key to his troubled life lies in Bergmann's statement: "His forceful language and decisive views either attracted men to him or repelled them."

We get another slant on Rev. Paul from Rev. Rúnólfur Marteinsson (1870-1959) who, although he never met Paul, nevertheless spent several years in the home of Rev. Jón Bjarnason, Marteinsson's uncle. From their discussion on doctrine Rev. Marteinsson came to the following conclusion about the principal doctrinal points of difference between his uncle and Paul. He stated that Rev. Jón's interpretation was that the divine inspiration of the Bible applied to the "word" but not necessarily "the words." Paul, on the other hand, took the fundamentalist's view that the original texts of the Bible were infallible.

With regard to the teachings of Jón and Paul on the subject of predestination, Marteinsson wrote: "It may, in short, be said that Pastor Jón laid emphasis on the necessity of faith as a condition for salvation, while Pastor Paul stressed the ineffable mercy of God as the sole condition." He continued, "In connection with the doctrine of justification I find no real difference between their views, merely a slight difference in their mode of expression."

Pastor Marteinsson comes to the conclusion that, "Despite the difference of viewpoints, I think these men have influenced each other and, if Pastor Paul had lived long enough, they could both have worked within the framework of the present Lutheran Synod [i.e. in 1917]."[2]

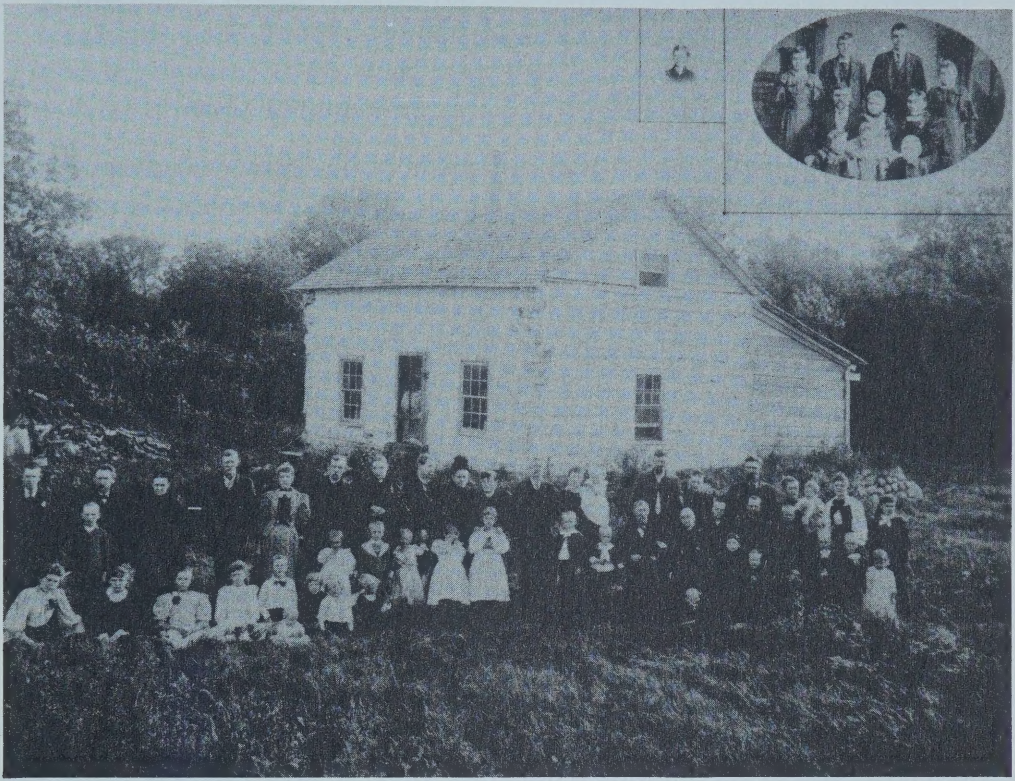
Another comparison of Paul's preaching with that of Jón's, but in a quite different vein, was made by Stephán G. Stephánsson in his letter of June 19, 1910 to Baldur Sveinsson:

> In the dispute between Pastors Jón and Paul, I sometimes came to Paul's defence among my neighbours in more or less the following words: "The only subject on which these men disagree is the means God will employ to bring about the destruction of the human race. According to both of them the end result will be the same—eternal damnation. So far as that is concerned and in other matters as well, I see no difference. To tell the truth, if there is a God who damns the souls of man, Paul's teaching in this respect seems to me more logical.

For the most part, the Reverend Paul Thorlaksson has been accorded more understanding treatment by recent historians of the Icelandic communities in America than he was given in life by some of his contemporaries. One exception, however, is the late Steinn O. Thompson, M.D., who, in his otherwise perceptive and well-documented local history, *Riverton and the Icelandic River Settlement: The Early Years,* asserted: "The Rev. Paul Thorlaksson was definitely out to destroy the colony if it was in his power."

In 1910 the Reverend Jón Bjarnason composed a memorial article on Paul Thorlaksson for inclusion in a book commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod of America. One paragraph of this article raised eyebrows and some questioning of the writer's real slant. In translation it reads:

> Pastor Paul shared the difficulties of his flock to the utmost. He staked everything he owned for their spiritual and temporal welfare, for which he was sometimes repaid with little gratitude, even in his last days, after his health had deserted him. Least of all at that time should he have had to contend with such appalling and undeserved



The Thorlaksson clan at the farmstead of Jón and Petrína Thorlaksson near Milton, North Dakota, summer 1895.

> hostility. Up to the time of his death he devoted himself to his calling with that steadfastness of faith, unselfishness and patience which are theirs alone who live in the assurance they are performing God's work and who trust in his guidance in the name of Jesus.

Commenting on this passage in a letter to Baldur Sveinsson, dated Markerville, Alberta, August 15, 1910, Stephán G. Stephánsson wrote:

> I have a copy of the "Memorial Book"—in my opinion, mediocrity in fancy dress. I understand everyone considers the "biography" of the late Paul Thorlaksson its finest feature, perhaps because "Kringla" [i.e. the Winnipeg Icelandic weekly *Heimskringla*] said so. Paul deserved a good article, but this one leaves much to be desired. If the expression "appalling and undeserved hostility" is intended as an allusion to the message delivered to him by a committee from Gardar congregation to the effect that they had decided to dispense with his pastoral services [he had already been bedfast for an entire year, and was able to fulfill few if any of his pastoral duties, but the congregation continued to pay the stipend they had promised him, but now wanted to procure the services of a pastor from Iceland], yes, if it alludes to that, then the expression is "undeserved." I know about that matter. I composed the message, was a member of the committee, and I recall what transpired between the committee and Paul. He died shortly afterward. It so happened that none of his family were home when we called on him, but none of us who paid that visit were acting on our own responsibility. If the Rev. Jón is referring to this, which I think he is doing, then he has misunderstood the facts through hearsay, for he had no first-hand knowledge of the occasion.

Considering the integrity of this renowned poet, a man whose words truthfully reflected every facet of his life, and considering that he was there to discuss the matter in Paul's presence, his version would seem to carry more weight.

Among the Icelanders in Iceland, as well as in America, the Reverend Paul Thorlaksson is not forgotten. In a letter to Dr. Paul H.T. Thorlakson, dated May 25, 1979, Dr. Kristjan Eldjarn, at that time President of the Republic of Iceland, commented:

> It is a continual source of fascination to me to contemplate the old Icelanders who crossed the ocean in the last century and the battle they had to wage, accommodating themselves to their new land and overcoming the difficulties of the pioneer years. Their pastors were

> of great help to them, and while there were several remarkable men among them, Pastor Paul was certainly one of the foremost. It is sad to think he had to die so young, for if any man appeared to have a brilliant future it was he.

Just one year before, Rev. Paul's name had been on the lips of the third- and fourth-generation descendants of the pioneers. During the weekend of June 29-July 1, 1978, the village of Mountain, North Dakota celebrated the centennial of its founding. It was a community venture and participation was not limited to people of Icelandic descent, yet the Icelandic heritage was still evident. The oldest and most historical building in the village is Víkur Lutheran Church, erected on the land Paul Thorlaksson donated for a church and cemetery, and only a few yards from the memorial stone placed over his grave in 1894.

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1. In 1902, the Rev. F.J. Bergmann, who succeeded the Rev. Hans B. Thorgrimsen as pastor of the Víkur Lutheran Church at Mountain, N.D., resigned his pastorate there to come to Winnipeg, where he became the first instructor in Icelandic Language and Literature at Wesley College, now the University of Winnipeg, and pastor of the Tabernacle Congregation, serving Icelandic Lutheran families living south of Notre Dame Avenue. In 1909 Bergmann and the Tabernacle Congregation withdrew from the Icelandic Lutheran Synod as a consequence of Jón Bjarnason's bitter attack on Bergmann in *Sameíníngín* after he had spoken out in favour of the "New Theology."

2. *Minningarit Hins evangeliska lúterska kirkjufélags Íslendinga í Vesturheimi 1885-1910*, p. 60 ff.

CONCLUSION

ALTHOUGH REV. PAUL was generally regarded as an intolerant spokesman for a reactionary form of Lutheranism and a dictator in congregational matters, paradoxically he was nevertheless seen to be capable of admiring and respecting a man's personal and intellectual qualities while disagreeing with him on points of doctrine. In this respect Paul presaged the course Icelandic Lutheranism in North America eventually was to follow: unswerving loyalty to the fundamental principles of Lutheran doctrine, but in a spirit of goodwill which did not preclude the possibility of friendly relations with people of other persuasions, provided the spirit of goodwill was reciprocated. Many years were destined to pass, however, before this became a reality.

Paul's relationship with Björn Pjetursson, the man who became the first Icelandic Unitarian minister in North America and served the Icelandic Unitarian congregation in Winnipeg from 1890 until his death in 1893, is a clear example of Paul's ability to respect a man's integrity even though he might disagree with him theologically.

In Thorlákur Gunnar Jónsson's preface to the manuscript he wrote at Paul's dictation from his deathbed in February 1882, he stated:

> The following is a deposition which the late Pastor Paul Thorlaksson dictated from his deathbed at Mountain, North Dakota, in 1882 at the request of his friend, the late Björn Pjetursson. It was agreed by these two men that Björn should have Paul's statement printed together with his own recently compiled account of the circumstances and economic conditions of immigrant groups from Iceland and elsewhere who had settled in America. Björn's essay was printed and sent to Iceland, but Paul's statement was not included.

> The individual who took down Paul's words [i.e. T.G.J., his father] preserved the manuscript and has had it in safekeeping for the past eighteen years.
>
> Mountain, N.D., April 1900

The first paragraph of Paul's dictated statement reads in translation:

> I have listened to and reflected upon the above mentioned message from Mr. Björn Pjetursson to our countrymen home in Iceland and am unable to find anything in it requiring alteration or correction. On the contrary, I find it entirely in accord with my own knowledge and experience here, but in order to give my countrymen a more comprehensive picture of this new settlement of ours in the Red River Valley I should like to add a few words of my own.

Björn Pjetursson was never a staunch supporter of Lutheran orthodoxy. Born August 2, 1826 to a pastor and his wife in eastern Iceland, he attended the Reykjavík Grammar School, but in his final year, 1849-1850, participated in an insurrection against the strict rules promulgated by the rector, with the result that he withdrew before obtaining his certificate. Instead of becoming a minister in the state church as his father had anticipated, he turned to farming, then entered politics and was elected to the National Assembly (Althing). He emigrated to New Iceland in 1876 and for the next three years made his home at Sandy Bar in the River Settlement.

It is indeed curious that Fridjón Fridriksson should have characterized Björn Pjetursson as "the bellwether of the [Norwegian] Synodmen in the River Settlement," for Will Kristjanson said of Björn's religious views at that time: "He did not think it necessary or even desirable to call the congregation Lutheran. Christians, he said, should not associate themselves with any other name than that of Christ himself. Too much emphasis was placed in sermons on 'Justification by Faith', a Pauline doctrine, he said, and the Bible as a whole should be considered merely as a source-book on religion."[1]

In 1879 Björn moved his family to the colony Paul Thorlaksson had founded in Dakota. Although he declined to join any of Paul's congregations there, it is evident that at some point he asked Paul for his opinion of the essay Björn had written about conditions in America.

Björn visited Iceland over the winter of 1880-1881, and submitted his essay to the editor of the Seydisfjörd journal *Skuld,* but for some reason it was not printed there. While visiting Pastor Björn Halldórsson, Paul's good friend and former mentor at Laufás, Pjetursson sent an abridged version of the essay to the editor of the Akureyri paper *Nordanfari,* which printed it in two instalments in the issues of October 22 and November 18, 1880.

Of all the individuals with whom Paul Thorlaksson came into close contact, there were probably none whose views on religion differed more radically from his own than Björn Pjetursson and Stephán G. Stephánsson, yet Paul could admire them as individuals and there can be no doubt of their admiration and affection for him. This says much for the stature of both men.

In a lecture entitled "Stephán G. Stephánsson and the Ethical Culture Society of North America," delivered March 13, 1981 in the Unitarian Church of Winnipeg, the Reverend Dr. Emil Gudmundson, inter-district representative of the Unitarian Universalist Association, paid tribute to the memories of Stephán G. and Paul Thorlaksson, characterizing them as men of discernment and culture, whose appreciation of each other's manly and intellectual qualities transcended sectarianism.

Although Stephán G. and Björn Pjetursson enjoyed cordial personal relationships with Paul, even though they did not agree with his theology, this was not possible in their subsequent relations with the Reverend Jón Bjarnason.

On February 4, 1888, Björn and six other men from Gardar and Mountain, North Dakota met with Stephán G. at his home to organize the Icelandic Cultural Society. The purpose of the society, according to an article written by Stephán G. and printed in the Winnipeg Icelandic weekly *Lögberg* April 11, 1888, was: "to promote culture and good behaviour and religion based on experience, knowledge and science. In place of religious sectarianism it will encourage goodwill and brotherhood; in place of undiscerning recitation of creeds, rational and unhampered investigation; in place of credulity, conviction based on experience and, in place of folly and prejudice, freedom and progress."

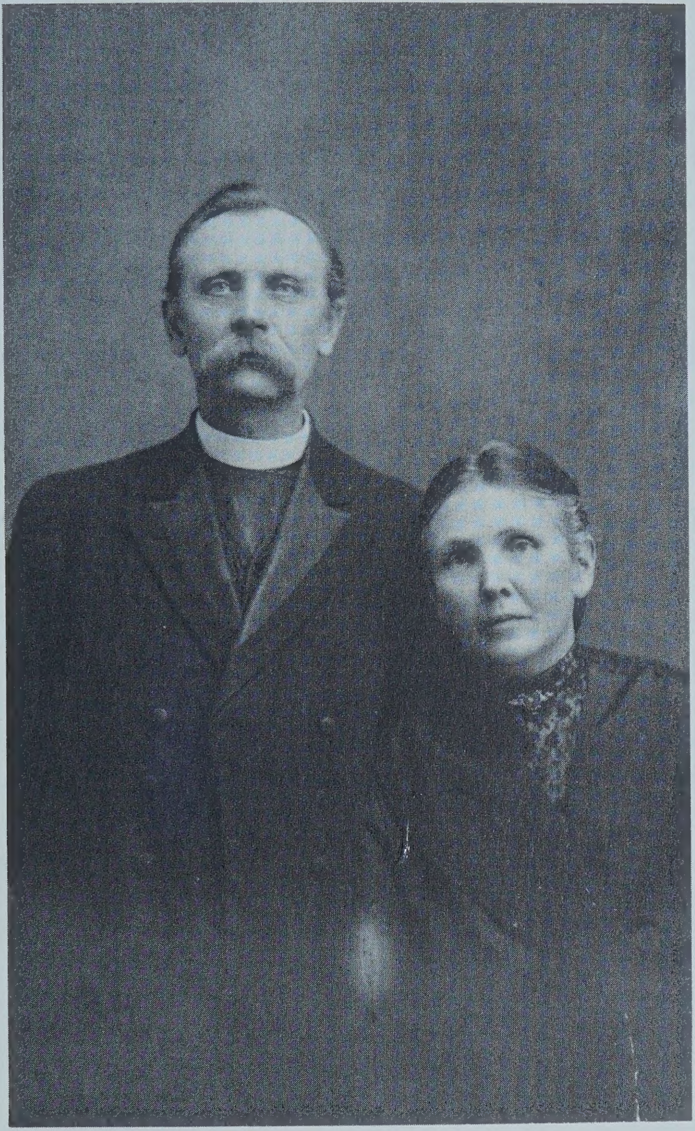
This society, although short-lived, was a forerunner of the Unitarian movement among the Icelandic people in America and it was to his associates in it that Stephán G. Stephánsson dedicated the first volume of his poems, published 1908-1909 in Reykjavík.

Before the members of the Cultural Society even had an opportunity to prove or disprove their good faith, they were subjected to a bitter attack by the Reverend Jón Bjarnason in the March and April issues of the Icelandic Synod publication *Sameiníngín*, of which Jón was editor. That such an organization, meeting on Sundays, independent of the authority of the church, should seek enlightenment by studying literary works, not all of which were produced by Christian authors or approved by orthodox Christians, constituted in Jón's eyes a frontal attack on the foundations of the Christian religion. He scornfully referred to the organizers of the society as "Icelandic farmers who have never attended school," and declared that "a society of Anti-Christ has raised its standard."

The Reverend Jón Bjarnason headed the Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod of America from its inauguration in 1885 until 1908 when, because of failing health, he declined to seek re-election as president. He continued, however, as editor of *Sameiníngín* until shortly before his death in 1914. In 1910 he was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Theology by Thiel College in Greenville, Pennsylvania.

During the latter part of his life he devoted a good portion of his energies to criticizing men with whom he disagreed. Among the objects of his disapproval were two Bishops of Iceland, the Right Reverend Pjetur Pjetursson after his election to that office, and the Right Reverend Jón Helgason prior to his election. Others in this illustrious company were the Reverend Fridrik J. Bergmann, the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian poet and patriot Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, often referred to as "the uncrowned King of Norway," and the eminent Danish literary critic and professor at the University of Copenhagen, Georg Brandes (1842-1927).

In 1888, when Jón Bjarnason made his attack on the Cultural Society, the four ordained members of the Icelandic Synod were, in addition to himself, the Reverend Magnús J. Skaptason at New Iceland, the Reverend Fridrik J. Bergmann at Mountain, North Dakota and the Reverend Niels Steingrímur Thorlaksson at Minneota, Minnesota. In 1891 Reverend Magnús J. Skaptason was expelled from the Synod for his Unitarian views. Five congregations seceded from the Synod that year and the one at Selkirk became divided. Early in his career the Reverend Fridrik J. Bergmann was a conservative. In 1907, however, he expressed in Thorgeirsson's *Almanak* his doubts as to the wisdom of Jón Bjarnason's attack on the Cultural Society in 1888, and during 1909-1910 he withdrew from the Synod as a consequence of Bjarnason's attacks on him personally and on the "New Theology" of which Bergmann was a supporter. At that time six congregations and almost 2000 people are said to have withdrawn from the Synod.[2]



Reverend Niels Steingrímur Thorlaksson and his Norwegian wife, Erika Rynning. Reverend Niels was Reverend Paul's younger brother, and was ordained in 1887 by Reverend Jón Bjarnason (President of the Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod of America) in the newly built church in Mountain, North Dakota. He served congregations in Minneota, Minnesota, Park River, North Dakota and Selkirk, Manitoba.

When Jón Bjarnason died in 1914 the only pastor who had been a member of the Synod since 1888 was the Reverend Niels Steingrímur Thorlaksson, Paul's younger brother, who was then pastor of the Icelandic Lutheran congregation in Selkirk, Manitoba.

Throughout his life the Reverend Niels Steingrímur Thorlaksson remained faithful to the principles and doctrines of orthodox Lutheranism. On these matters he deviated no more than his brother had. Yet, like his brother Paul, he was a man of goodwill, possessed of a keen sense of humour, an appreciation of music and literature, and the enviable ability to respect the integrity of men, even those with whom he was not in doctrinal agreement.

In a memorial booklet published after Pastor Steingrímur's death in 1943, the late Gunnar B. Björnson wrote of his relations with the "free thinkers" in Minneota: ". . . let it be understood that Rev. Thorlaksson had many friends among the people who were not of the fold he shepherded."[3]

In Selkirk, Manitoba Rev. Niels Steingrímur Thorlaksson was a close friend of both the Roman Catholic priest and the Methodist minister. It was, moreover, at his instigation that the first ministerial association in rural Manitoba was organized at Selkirk.

Goodwill, despite doctrinal differences, eventually came to replace animosity and vituperation in the Icelandic Synod. Paul Thorlaksson would have been proud that his brother chose to remain in the Synod to guide it in this new direction.

> And now abideth faith, hope and charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity. (I. Cor., 13, 13)

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1. Will Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba: A Manitoba Saga*, p. 93.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 342 f.
3. *In Memoriam, The Rev. Niels Steingrímur Thorlaksson 1857-1943. President Emeritus of the Icelandic Lutheran Synod of America*, p. 17.

Appendix I: Petition to Canadian Government, 1879

We the undersigned deem it our duty to express our deepfelt thanks to the generous Dominion Government of Canada on account of the great loan, an amount of $80,000.00 according, as the Dominion Agents Mr. John Taylor & Mr. S. Jónasson tell us, which it has granted to us Icelanders that have immigrated to New Iceland.

We do so the more joyfully the better we consider our poverty and helplessness at our landing in this country and how good it did us to get said loan, thus being enabled to form a settlement of our own.

But the deeper this is felt the more we regret that this liberal assistance has not for several unfavorable circumstances resulted in the benefit intended.

In spite of the great loan we have not in three years been able to procure the most necessary farming implements but the majority of us have to content themselves with the pickaxe instead of the plough and with the rake instead of the harrow. For want of implements and teams we have not been able to raise any kind of grain to amount to anything up to date and have no reason to hope that we shall make the necessary progress in that respect in the nearest future.

Consequently we are in so poor circumstances at the present time, that many are about to leave their homes for want of sustenance and upon the whole we can not see how we are to maintain ourselves here. The main cause of our distress and poverty is no doubt the mistake there has been made in the selection of the reserve. Our settlement is much out of the way and situated far from the settlements of all civilized people, between railroad lines and Half-breed reserve at the south Lake Winnipeg and the wilderness east of it at the east, Indian reserve of questionable quality at the north and low and swampy land not likely to be cultivated as far as it is known to us, viz. 20 miles west, for a long time to come.

This, however, makes our situation so much the more embarrassing as the reserve itself is low and full of morasses and "muskeg" and hardly passable.

Although some of these hinderances might be moved away by building of roads and ditching, we consider ourselves by no means able to do it.

The out of the way situation and the difficulty in communicating with other civilized people is a greater drawback to us Icelanders than most other people, as we in consequence of the isolated situation and physical condition of our fatherland are so far behind most other people of the civilized world as to practical knowledge of any kind.

Another thing that has made the great Government loan be less available to us than intended is the unreasonable moving of our first detachment to this reserve in the fall 1875 after the winter had set in.

During that winter they could not make proper use of the time but had to consume the loan and the cattle they owned for their sustenance, then they also were troubled by scurvy and other diseases caused by bad accommodation and unhealthy food and causing the death of so many even in the bloom of life.

In the next winter we were attacked with the smallpox, the sad effect of which, in spite of the generous efforts of the government to stop it, is too well known to be related here.

It never came to our knowledge what rules and regulations have been prescribed by the government as to the management and distribution of the loan, therefore we can not say whether it has been used so as to suit creditors' purpose or not, especially as we have not yet been able to obtain any accounts of its distribution from the part of the Agents. We never were thoroughly informed about the conditions upon which the loan was granted; we were only told that it were due in 10 years bearing no interest during the first 4 years and payable after that in 6 installments, but it *was not mentioned at all* that we were bound to live in the reserve during those 10 years whether it proved bad or good, though we are told so now. That was all what came to our notice in this respect until some provisions and seeds were to be distributed in the spring 1877; then there appeared a document written in English understood by only very few of us; we were told that those who would not sign this document were not to get any food or seed.

Said document was accompanied by a duplicate written in Icelandic and signed by Mr. Sigtryggur Jónasson, styling himself "Dominion interpreter."

Most or all of us willingly signed this document in the firm belief that it were issued by the Government and correctly translated by the "Dominion interpreter."

By said document one bound himself and his heirs to repay the loan according to a correct account and mortaged their lots already taken up or which they might take up together with all their improvements there.

This was looked upon as a lawful mode of mortgage according to the liberal meaning of the Icelandic duplicate. This understanding continued to be undisturbed while some holders of the loan intended to move away from the reserve in the spring 1878. One of them had made considerable improvements on his land, which he wished to have estimated as the security and accepted as a part payment of his portion of the loan. The agents refused to do so but required of him and the others that intended to move away that they gave them a promissory note. This they willingly consented to. Whereupon the agents took away from them the little they had, ordered, as they told us, so to do by the Government.

Later the assistant agent and "Dominion interpreter," Mr. Sigtryggur Jónasson, has publicly been asked the question if said document came from the Government and what force it had. He has given the answer that the document did not, properly speaking, come from the Government but were, however, in accordance with its order. The mortgage were not valid, the Icelandic translation not being accurate, and the English document not legal form of mortgage.

It seems to us that this mode of acting is rather singular and we can not believe it to be in harmony with the Government's will and intention, nor can we see any reason why the agents of the Government should have deemed it necessary to resort a stratagem over against us as we were "green" and sincere in all these mutual transactions.

In consideration of what is mentioned above, viz. that our reserve is out of the way, low and wet and almost impassable, that we have immigrated on the faith of the Government agents' integrity, that we have labored industriously on our lots for 3 years, in the same good faith built better houses than is usually the case among new settlers, cleared and fenced a good deal, then it does not seem to us to be fair that those who for the sake of poverty have not courage & power enough to meet and remove the difficulties that bar the way to prosperity here shall be prevented from seeking more favorable position by taking a more suitable and better land outside the so called Icelandic reserve, but we are in fact prohibited from so doing, as the agents tell us that whosoever moves out of the reserve must either fully pay his portion of the loan or his property (or what he has for his sustenance) shall be seized and his work on the land valued nothing.

If this is the way we are to be treated in, we can not see that we will ever be able to repay the loan or progress or prosper here in America as we have expected, like so many other poor immigrants.

Therefore we most humbly beg to set forth the following wishes and petition in the hope that the high Dominion Government of Canada will graciously condescend to hear us.

1. That a committee of five be elected by the Government or its agents and the council of this colony according to a mutual agreement in order to estimate the improvements and work done here by those who wish to move away from here.

2. That every man who according to the estimation of said committee have done enough on his lot in order that the value of his work cover his debt be at

liberty to move away with all his cattle and other things, whether he has got them as loan or he has bought them for his own money.

3. That all those who according to the estimation of said committee have not done enough on their lot to fully cover their debt be still at liberty to move away with all the living and moveable things they have got on the condition that they give a promissory note to the agents for what according to the valuation of the committee is lacking in order to cover the sum loaned.

4. That the interest, which according to what the agents have published is 6 per cent be not demanded but for the last 6 years of the time stipulated but no interest arise from the loan during the first 4 years of 10 as was originally promised.

5. That it may please the Government to send us an answer to this petition through the chairman of our colony council.

New Iceland
Keewatin Canada
In March A.D. 1879.

(Here the names of 130 petitioners, holders of Government loan and land in the Icelandic reserve—Vid. the inc[losed] Ice[landic] original.)

To the Dom[inion] Government of Canada.

The undersigned hereby testifies, that this is a translation of the incl[osed] Icelandic original which he has translated upon petitioners' request according to his best ability.

Tr[anslated] at Winnipeg April 12th 1879.

P. Thorlaksson
(Icel[andic] Lutheran minister)

Appendix II: Canadian Government Loan

Framfari II, 8 (January 7, 1879), p. 30

(Letter from Sigtryggur Jónasson to the editor of *Framfari* regarding the form he had circulated for the signatures of loan takers and terms of the government loan to the colonists of New Iceland.)

Information
Regarding the Loan which the Canadian Government Extended to Aid the Icelandic Colony on the Shores of Lake Winnipeg

To the editor of *Framfari*.

At a meeting held in Arnes district in mid-December, among other things it was decided to obtain answers to the following questions:

From what date is the duration of the loan reckoned?

From what date is the interest calculated?

What is the rate of interest?

For what period of time is the loan extended?

What terms are stipulated on the mortgage form which Sigtryggur Jónasson had circulated for men's signatures?

To what extent is this mortgage valid?

Was it decreed by the Dominion Government or others, and if by others, whom?

My replies to these questions are as follows:

1) Although the loan which the Canadian Government extended to aid the Icelandic colony on the shores of Lake Winnipeg was actually made in the years 1875, 76 and 77, for purposes of reckoning, the date of issue will be deemed to be January 1, 1879.

2) Interest on the loan, at the rate of 6 percent, is calculated from December 31, 1878.

3) The loan which the Icelanders have received from the government is to be fully repaid within 10 (ten) years, calculated from the 31st day of December, 1878, or before the first day of January, 1889.

4) Those who have taken land in the Icelandic colony and, as was expected of them when the loan was extended, reside thereon, will not be required to repay any portion of the government loan or interest on it until four years have elapsed from December 31, 1878; but before the lapse of five years, or before the end of the year 1883, it is anticipated that those who have accepted a loan will have repaid one sixth of the principal together with a proportionate amount of interest and that they will continue making such payments annually until six yearly payments have been made and the debt together with accrued interest repaid in full.

5) Sigtryggur Jónasson did not cause any mortgage form to be circulated for men's signatures; he did, however, provide the reeves (who, in accordance with the wish of the residents, were responsible for the distribution of the government loan, each in his own district) with a certain document, dated May 23, 1877, recommending that they have it signed by all who had received the government loan. As is apparent from the covering letter to the reeves, the document constitutes a temporary acknowledgment, but is not a formal mortgage. Furthermore, it is evident from the accompanying translation that the document is an acknowledgment of receipt of the government loan (amount unspecified), a promise to repay what men have received and are still receiving of the government loan in accordance with the conditions stipulated by the government for its repayment, and an agreement to the effect that the lands or tracts the recipients of the loans have taken and may take under cultivation and to dwell on should, together with all improvements thereon, become a pledge and security to the government for repayment of the loan. In a letter dated October 2, 1876, the Dominion Government directed us to procure men's acknowledgment of their indebtedness to the government and their promise or pledge of repayment, but did not provide a specific form for this purpose. To all who cared to inform themselves, it was obvious from the outset that the government intended men to pledge their lands and improvements in the established manner as security for their indebtedness. In order to be assured of the sincere intention of the recipients of the loan to give such security, the government expressed its desire to S. Jónasson that men signify their assent in writing on the document of acknowledgment, mentioned above.

Since this subject is of concern to all in the colony who have received the loan, I am sending you the questions and my reply to them, so that you may, if you see fit, publish them in *Framfari*.

I think it worthy of special mention in this connection, that although the government requests men to pledge their lands as security for their indebtedness, it is not intended that these lands be sold from under them in the event that they, for any reason, are unable to meet their obligations within the stipulated time, but rather that the lands be regarded as security for the debts until they are repaid. I would add that in those instances where men have given no security for the repayment of their indebtedness, the government requires of those who intend to leave the country before their properties constitute sufficient security that they pay their debts in full before emigrating, except for those who, with the government agent's consent, assign their property to others, not indebted to the government, who would in turn reside on the properties and take upon themselves full legal responsibility for the indebtedness.

Sigtr. Jónasson.

Appendix III: Report and Refutation

Framfari I, 32 (July 24, 1878), p. 126

Gudmunder Nordmann's Report on the Land in Dakota

The Dakota Colony

Since my return from the trip I made last month to look over the land in Pembina County, Dakota, that Jóhann P. Hallsson, S. Josúa Björnsson and others of our countrymen have inspected and intend to settle on, many people have asked me about it; I would therefore like to give a description of that land and declare publicly my opinion of it.

I give this description because I think, moreover, that Jóhann and his companions have not described the land correctly and therefore consider it my duty to give my countrymen an opportunity to obtain a true report about that land, so men can think things over thoroughly before making a decision to move there. I journeyed south to Dakota with the purpose of settling there if the land appealed to me, but in no way could I consider the land there, which I had heard so much talk about, habitable.

The land Jóhann and his companions have selected and are advising men to take lies fully 40 miles southwest from Pembina village, east of the so-called Pembina Hills. The nearest house or farm lies 12 miles from Pembina and the next one 15 miles farther on. From there it is 5 miles more to the farm of Olsen, the Norwegian. Along all this way there are no habitations other than the houses mentioned above. Five or six have settled in the vicinity of Olsen's, all of whom live along the river or brook called Tongue River. North of the river there is a belt of woodland, composed mainly of crooked oak, ash, elm and "bass wood," which appeared to me in no wise suitable, neither for house building nor the construction of fences. About 10 miles northwest of Olsen's, at the foot of the Pembina Hills, is where Jóhann and his companions are thinking of taking land, but there is enough habitable land there for only six to eight farmers; I did not inspect that land myself, but Árni Thorlaksson from Nýhagi, who did inspect it and looked around more widely in the neighbourhood than did the other Icelanders, reported it to be poorer than the land we had inspected. Árni then joined us and we walked first about 10 miles in a westerly direction from Olsen's, along the south bank of the river, where the land is devoid of timber, sandy and, in my opinion, uninhabitable. Beyond there are four tracts, just taken up by two Canadian newcomers, but on which no dwelling has yet been erected. I considered these tracts rather good, far better than most of the other land in the area. Although there are, a little farther west, several tracts with no woods at all, which I deem habitable, almost all the land around is trackless and covered with thick brush, from three to six feet high, which makes the use of a plough impossible. From there we walked about 12 miles along the foot of the hills toward the southeast. All that terrain was covered with thick brush and undergrowth; all of it was uninhabitable, for nowhere is there any timber for houses or fencing, nor any meadowland, although the soil there is a little less poor than in some of the unwooded areas, so sandy that nothing grows there except a little grass. We veered northward again and headed for Olsen's, encountering along the way a small stretch of treeless but sandy terrain, a very small wooded area and a marsh or bog, with ankle-deep water, which might be utilized as meadowland. We crossed only a few tracts we considered habitable, but they were by no means good. We spent a day and a half on this journey of inspection, covering on foot between 30 and 40 miles altogether. The Pembina Hills, as they are called, are low sandy ridges, unforested and almost devoid of grass, but in some places overgrown with the aforementioned brush. These ridges are uninhabitable and totally useless for all purposes. Tongue River is a brook and cannot be called a river; it flows through a deep chasm, but the water is so shallow and the bed so full of tree stumps that it is not navigable even for small rowboats. Where the banks are wooded, they would be very difficult to clear. None of this district has been surveyed and it is uncertain when it will be.

If I am to give an overall description of this land, I can say only that it consists in some places of slightly undulating sandy prairie, where only a little grass grows; for the most part it is sandy, but in some places there is gravel; most of it is extremely sandy terrain, overgrown with a thick tangle of underbrush, and then there are the swampy areas I mentioned before. Thus, there are only a few habitable tracts here and there. Settlement will be sparse and cultivation difficult. The principal disadvantages, to my mind, however, are the unproductiveness and below average quality of the soil, the tracklessness of the land and the absence, except for a little along the Tongue River, of timber suitable for building or fencing. To this one might add that the district is remote from any place which might properly be termed a settlement, as well as the fact that there is no employment to be had on the few farms between there and Pembina. The road to Pembina is passable for its entire length (after it dries in the spring), but shopping there is unsatisfactory, some items being far more expensive than in Winnipeg, wheat flour, for instance, three dollars and fifty cents.

In all conscience, therefore, I can only say that I would dissuade all my countrymen from moving there, whether they have the financial means or not, for the former would find only that they had wasted their resources to no avail and the latter that they were unable to survive the first winter there.

Gimli, July 9, 1878.
Guðmundur Norðmann.

Framfari II, 6 (December 11, 1878), pp. 22-23

Sigurdur Josúa Björnsson's Refutation of Gudmundur Nordmann's Letter

Truth Makes the Best Reading

Since our loyal compatriot has seen fit to give our countrymen a geographical description of the so-called "Dakota colony" along with advice in *Framfari*, I, No. 32, where he singles me out as the principal abettor in enticing folk there with mendacious statements, and since the esteemed editor of *Framfari* published this information in his paper, indicating thereby that he deemed the subject worthy of discussion, we permit ourselves the privilege of requesting space in his paper for a few comments on the all too numerous distortions which unfortunately characterize the article, for the truth of the old proverb often becomes apparent: "a story told by one man is only half told."

The writer's motive for giving this description—which he explains so cogently, to wit: "that we have in no wise described the land correctly," and that he feels it his duty to present a true and correct description—is very noble, in view of the fact that he could convince himself of the diametric opposite of what he claims we have said and advised men to do.

1st distortion: "The land Jóhann Hallsson and his companions have selected and are advising men to take lies fully 40 miles to the southwest of Pembina village." The district where last spring we planned to take land and of which we gave our fellow countrymen in New Iceland a brief description was and is approximately 18 to 20 miles south of Pembina village. One should interpret that to signify by the direct route, without making detours or losing one's way.

2nd distortion: "The nearest house or farm lies 12 miles from Pembina and the next one 15 miles farther on" etc. The closest farm is 1/4 mile from Pembina village; the settlement, moreover, extends from Pembina village almost due west to the hills. From Pembina village to Mr. B. Olsen's is 25 miles as the crow flies, and in that district along the Tongue River there are not merely three houses, but between 80 and 100, including two post offices. But the writer may be excused for overlooking the houses, for he told us that he had got lost somewhere south of Pembina village, had slept under the open sky and came across a passable road only some miles farther to the east. He obviously, however, forgot having lost his way when the spirit moved him to this description.

3rd distortion: "Five or six have settled in the vicinity of Olsen's." There were only three when the present writer passed that way.

4th distortion: "The trees are crooked and stunted and unfit for houses or fences." The trees, which stand 20 to 36 feet high and in thickness are about the span of a man's arms, whether oak, ash, elm or "bass" wood, we do not consider necessary for house building; at least that was the opinion of our fellow countrymen in New Iceland with regard to the trees there. The wood suitable for fencing we call "poplar." It does not have to be split; the logs are from 16 to 24 feet long, and there are enough and to spare here for any who know how to use their eyes.

5th distortion: "Jóhann (Hallsson) and his companions are considering taking land about 10 miles northwest of Olsen's, but there is enough habitable land there for only six to eight farmers; I did not inspect that land myself" etc. The land we planned to take, mentioned above—and which the writer seems to be referring to, unless he is relying entirely on guesswork—lies due south of Olsen's farm. Since the area has not yet been surveyed, we cannot state for certain the exact distance from Olsen's, but men familiar with the district estimate it to be about 8 miles, and the district is so large that several dozen men could obtain the same kind of land there. The principal advantages are these: dry and level arable land with two to three feet of black topsoil; dry level hayland with good and abundant grass. The woods along three brooks, called Park, Cart and Little Salt, are of the same quality as those along the Tongue River. The water in these brooks is of sparkling clarity and has an excellent taste. There are, moreover, many springs with the same type of water. Árni Thorlaksson was a member of our group and along with the rest of us bore the brunt of the writer's hasty judgment in the introductory lines of his report, wherein we are accused "of not having described the land correctly." The writer nevertheless cites Árni Thorlaksson as an authority to substantiate his own impression; in his introductory remarks he promises, however, to present a true and reliable description, issuing, naturally, from his own eyewitness and experience, according to our interpretation of his words—yet he acknowledges that he never saw nor set foot on the tract himself. At the same time he can declare with certainty how much of it is habitable and proffer dependable advice in this respect. Is not the proper name for that "rigamarole"?

6th distortion: ". . . about 10 miles in a westerly direction from Olsen's, and the land there is devoid of timber" etc. When one travels in this direction, the sandy land extends for three miles, but there are woods on both sides and nowhere is the plain between the woods more than one mile wide. At the beginning of the fourth mile the land begins to rise and then the nature of the terrain begins to change; it is, for the most part, flat, with some timber along the river. The black topsoil there is similar to that farther south near "Park." There is underbrush here and there, but nowhere does it exceed a height of 2 to 3 feet. It is, moreover, regarded as the best arable land and easier to plow than where there is no brush, for the roots loosen and the land can be harrowed as soon as it has been broken.

7th distortion: When the writer comes to the Canadians, he finds, however, "good tracts, better than most of the surrounding land, and west of that, several timberless tracts." These tracts belonging to the Canadians, which he considers good, are just about equal in quality to all the surrounding land, except that timber cannot, naturally, be of equal quality everywhere, but there is timber all along the river west to the hills, so these "timberless tracts" simply do not exist. South of the woods is an extensive plain, fine hay land, on the other side of which the woods begin again. This hay land has very lush grass, so that in ten hours an average mower can mow ten "tons," utilized here as cattle fodder. The arable land here is similar to that described earlier; the underbrush grows highest next to the woods, but nowhere so high as to prevent plowing. Then he has a bad sense of direction, the poor fellow. When one follows the line of the hills, as he did, to one's left is due south and, where he wandered around, an occasional clearing is to be found. There are low poplars and, in some places, the odd hardwood. The hay land is not tight up against the hills, but about a mile distant from them; the arable land, which is next to the hills, is somewhat sandy, but the sandy tracts are not extensive, just as is the case in the vicinity of Olsen's, which is the sandiest terrain known here in Pembina County. Although wood for fencing cannot be found on every homestead, there is plenty to be had only a short distance away.

8th distortion: "The Pembina Hills are low sandy ridges, almost devoid of timber and grass." Although the writer was not sufficiently energetic to climb to the top of them and, therefore, as he did previously, was constrained to rely upon guesswork rather than knowledge, more inaccurate guesses have sometimes been made. The hills have an elevation of 210 feet (see The Public Domain, No. 3, Rogers Park, Ill. February 1878); on them grow sizeable forests and one can find extensive plains covered with grass. At the same time I do not claim and have never maintained that they are habitable.

The writer then returns to the Tongue River. It might well be that faulty observation prevented him from describing it correctly in any respect; everything in that portion of his report is more or less the opposite of the true case, even though he does not claim that the river could be utilized to operate mills. It never entered anyone's mind to clear the woods along the river; men would by far prefer to chop down the lowest trees, but then they did not study agronomy under G. Norðmann.

To ensure that the dull witted comprehend his report, the writer then makes his principal point. In presenting "a true illustration of his 'character'," he met with his first success. Otherwise he is unworthy of any more extensive reply than I have briefly made here. I would, however, call the writer's attention to his earlier comment about the bog, "with ankle deep water, which might be used as meadowland," which is now all covered with twisted, stunted brush. That is a remarkable masterpiece, is it not?

In closing I would counsel the gifted writer—in the unfortunate event the same spirit moves him to make an offering of his conscience for the people—to contemplate that difficult and important step which we all must tread.

Here we need to take great care.
All of us must be prepared
For criticism everywhere.

It's not safe to walk in a reverie,
For snakes don't hibernate
Permanently.

Farewell!

Written in October, 1878.
S[igurður] Josúa Björnsson.

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Dr. George J. Houser was born in Pennsylvania in 1916. He served in the Counter-Intelligence Corps of the United States Army in North Africa and Italy, and then worked in New York as an insurance investigator before emigrating to Canada and becoming a Canadian citizen. He received his BA from Sir George Williams University (Montreal) and his MA from McGill University (Montreal). In 1967 he was awarded a scholarship to study Scandinavian folklore, culture and literature in Sweden. In 1978 he obtained his PhD from the University of Iceland (Reykjavík) for his work in Icelandic on folk veterinary traditions in Iceland.

Dr. Houser was the recipient of several scholarships and grants for his scholarly research and publications on Swedish and Icelandic subjects in Canada. He was a Part-Time Lecturer at the University of Manitoba from 1979-1982 in the Department of Icelandic Language and Literature, and translated into English the complete body of *Framfari*, the Canadian-Icelandic newspaper founded at New Iceland. He was fluent in six languages and could read six others.

Dr. Houser died in Winnipeg in July 1988.

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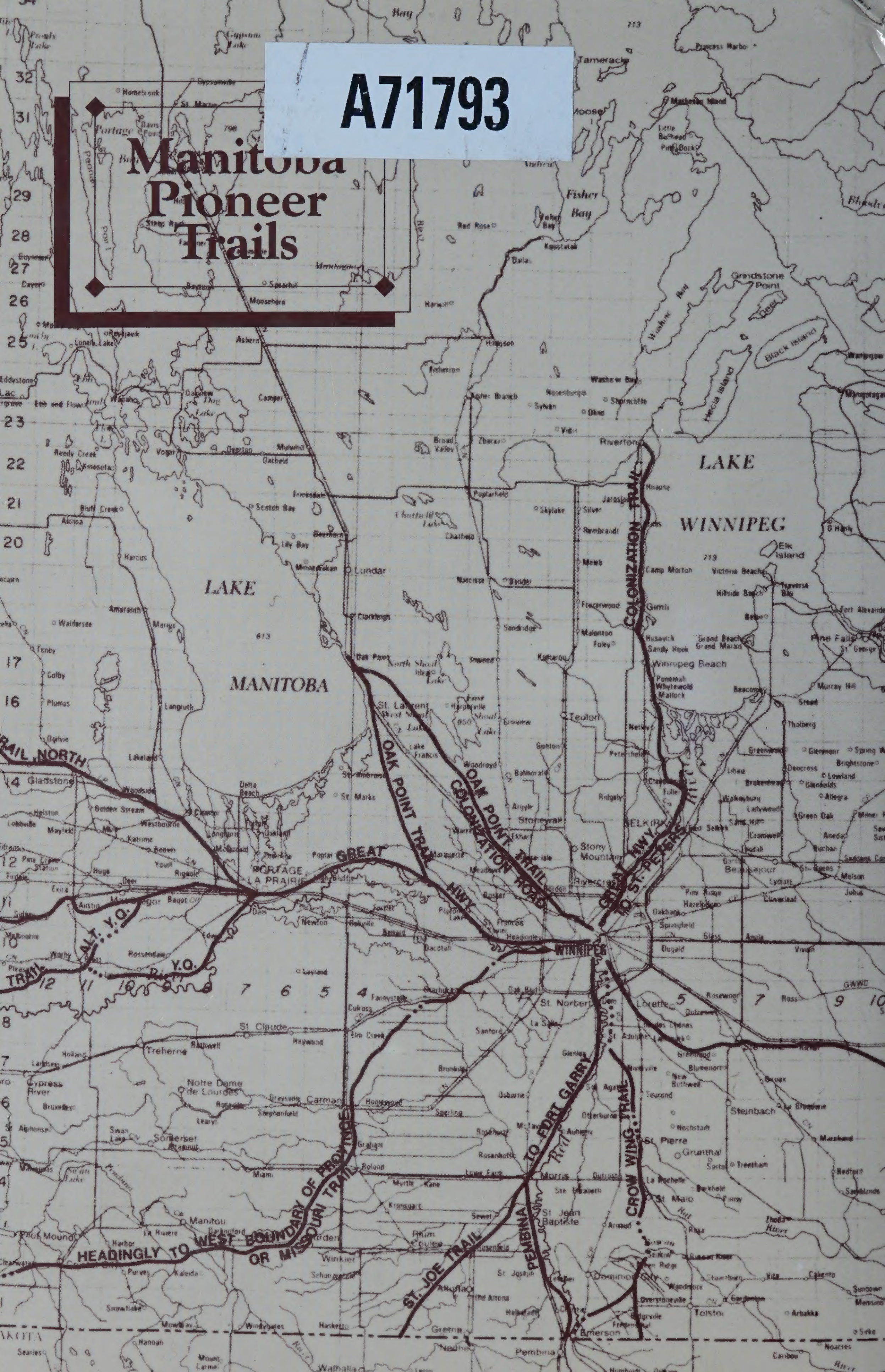
Manitoba Pioneer Trails


LAKE MANITOBA
LAKE WINNIPEG
Fisher Bay
Black Island
Hecla Island
Elk Island
TRAIL NORTH
GREAT HWY.
ALT. Y.Q.
Y.Q.
TRAIL
OAK POINT TRAIL
OAK POINT TRAIL
COLONIZATION ROAD
COLONIZATION TRAIL
GREAT HWY. TO ST. PETERS
TO FORT GARRY
CROW WING TRAIL
PEMBINA
ST. JOE TRAIL
BOUNDARY OF PROVINCE
OR MISSOURI TRAIL
HEADINGLY TO WEST
WINNIPEG
PORTAGE LA PRAIRIE
SELKIRK
Gimli
Riverton
Winnipeg Beach
Stonewall
Stony Mountain
Teulon
Lundar
Oak Point
St. Laurent
Headingly
St. Norbert
Morris
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Emerson
Pembina
Gretna
Carman
Manitou
Pilot Mound
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Notre Dame de Lourdes
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Gladstone
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Beausejour
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Fisher Branch
Arborg
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Victoria Beach
Camp Morton
Hnausa
St. Adolphe
Ste. Agathe
St. Malo
La Broquerie
Dugald
Oakbank
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Tolstoi
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DAKOTA